Appeals Court

Cory Doctorow

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About Doctorow:

Cory Doctorow (born July 17, 1971) is a blogger, journalist and science fiction author who serves as co-editor of the blog Boing Boing. He is in favor of liberalizing copyright laws, and a proponent of the Creative Commons organisation, and uses some of their licenses for his books. Some common themes of his work include digital rights management, file sharing, Disney, and post-scarcity economics. Source: Wikipedia

Also available on Feedbooks Doctorow:

- *I, Robot* (2005)
- *Little Brother* (2008)
- *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom* (2003)
- *When Sysadmins Ruled the Earth* (2006)
- *For The Win* (2010)
- *With a Little Help* (2010)
- *Makers* (2009)
- *CONTENT: Selected Essays on Technology, Creativity, Copyright and the Future of the Future* (2008)
- *Someone Comes to Town, Someone Leaves Town* (2005)
- *Eastern Standard Tribe* (2004)

About Stross:

Charles David George "Charlie" Stross (born Leeds, October 18, 1964) is a writer based in Edinburgh, Scotland. His works range from science fiction and Lovecraftian horror to fantasy. Stross is sometimes regarded as being part of a new generation of British science fiction writers who specialise in hard science fiction and space opera. His contemporaries include Alastair Reynolds, Ken MacLeod and Liz Williams. Obvious inspirations include Vernor Vinge, Neal Stephenson, William Gibson, and Bruce Sterling, among other cyberpunk and postcyberpunk writers. His first published short story, "The Boys", appeared in Interzone in 1987: his first novel, Singularity Sky was published by Ace in 2003 and was nominated for the Hugo Award. A collection of his short stories, Toast: And Other Rusted Futures appeared in 2002. Subsequent short stories have been nominated for the Hugo Award, Nebula Award, and other awards. His novella "The Concrete Jungle" won

the Hugo award for its category in 2005. Most recently, Accelerando won the 2006 Locus Award for best science fiction novel, was a finalist for the John W. Campbell Memorial Award for the year's best science fiction novel, and was on the final ballot for the Hugo Award in the best novel category. Glasshouse is on the final ballot for the Hugo Award in the best novel category. In the 1970s and 1980s, Stross published some role-playing game articles for Advanced Dungeons & Dragons in the White Dwarf magazine. Some of his creatures, such as the death knight, githyanki (borrowed from George R. R. Martin's book, Dying of the Light), githzerai, and slaad were later published in the Fiend Folio monster compendium. In addition to working as a writer of fiction he has worked as a technical author, freelance journalist, programmer, and pharmacist at different times. He holds degrees in Pharmacy and Computer Science. Rogue Farm, a machinima film based on his 2003 short story of the same title, debuted in August 2004. He is one of the Guests of Honour at Orbital 2008 the British National Science Fiction convention (Eastercon) in March 2008. Source: Wikipedia

Also available on Feedbooks Stross:

- *Accelerando* (2005)
- *Scratch Monkey* (1993)
- *Jury Service* (2002)

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What finally wakes Huw is the pain in his bladder. His head is throbbing, but his bladder has gone weak on him lately — if he doesn't get up and find the john soon he's going to piss himself, so he struggles up from a sump-hole of somnolence.

He opens his eyes to find that he's lying face-down in a hammock. The hammock sways gently from side to side in the hot stuffy air. Light streams across him in a warm flood from one side of the room; the floor below the string mesh is gray and scuffed and something tells him he isn't on land any more. Shit, he thinks, pushing stiffly against the edge and trying not to fall as the hammock slides treacherously out from under him. *Why am I so tired?*

His bare feet touch the ground before he realises he's bare-ass naked. He shakes his head, yawning. His veins feel as if all the blood has been replaced by something warm and syrupy and full of sleep. *Drugs?* he think, blinking. The walls —

Three of them are bland, gray sheets of structural plastic with doors in them. The fourth is an outward-leaning sheet of plexiglass or diamond or something. And a very, very long way below him he can see wave-crests.

Huw gulps, his pulse speeding. Something strange is lodged in the back of his throat: he stifles a panicky whistle. There in a corner is his battered kit-bag, and a heap of travel-worn clothing. He leans against the wall. There's got to be a crapper somewhere nearby, hasn't there? The floor, now he's awake enough to pay attention, is thrumming with a low bass chord from the engines and the waves are sloshing by endlessly below. As he picks at a dirty shirt a battered copper teapot rolls away from beneath it. "Shitfuckpissbugger," he swears, memories flooding back. Then he picks the teapot up and gives it a resentful rub.

"Wotcher, mate!" The djinn that materializes above the teapot is a hologram, so horribly realistic that for a moment Huw forgets his desperate need for a piss.

"Fuck you, too, Ade," he mumbles.

"What kind of way to welcome yer old mate is that, sunshine?" Hologram-Adrian's wearing bush jacket, pith helmet and shorts, a shotgun slung over one shoulder. "How yer feeling, anyway?"

"I feel like shit." Huw rubs his forehead. "Like I've been shat. Where am I? Where's Bonnie gotten to?"

"Flying the bloody ship. We can't all sleep. Don't worry, she's just hunky-dory. How about you?"

"Flying." Huw blinks. "Where the hell —"

"You've been sleeping like a baby for a good long while." Ade looks smug. "Don't worry, we got you out of Libya one jump ahead of Judge Rosa. You won't be arriving in Charleston, South Carolina for another four or five hours, why'n't you kick back and smoke some grass? I left at least a quarter of your stash —"

"*South Carolina?*" Huw screams, nearly dropping the teapot. "Unclefucking sewage filter, what do you want to send me *there* for?"

"Ah, pecker up. They're your co-religionists, aren't they? You won't find a more natural, flesh-hugging bunch on the planet than the Jesonians who got left behind in the Geek Rapture. Hell, they're the kind of down-home Luddites what make *you* look like Buck Rogers."

"They're *radioactive*," Huw wails. "And I'm an atheist. They burn atheists at the stake, don't they?" He rummages through his skanky clothes, turning them inside out and outside in as he searches for something not so a-crawl that he'd be unwilling to have it touch his nethers.

"Oh, hardly," says Adrian. "Just get a little activated charcoal and iodine in your diet and memorize the Lord's prayer and you'll be fine, sonny."

Huw ends up tying a t-shirt around his middle like a diaper and seizing the teapot, which has developed a nasty rattle in its guts.

"Breakfast and toilet. Not in that order. Sharp."

"That door there," says the tiny Adrian.

The zeppelin turns out to be a maryceleste, crewed by capricious iffrits whose expert-systems were trained by angry, resentful trade-unionists in ransom for their pensions. The amount of abuse required to keep the ship on-course and to keep its commissary and sanitary systems in good working order is heroic.

Huw opens the door to the bridge, clutching his head, to find Bonnie perched on the edge of a vast, unsprung chair, screaming imprecations at the air. She breaks off long enough to scream at him. "GET THE FUCK OFF MY BRIDGE!" she hollers, eyes wild, fingers clawed into the arm-rests.

Huw leaps back a step, dropping the huge, suspicious sausage he's

been gnawing at. His diaper unravels as he stumbles.

Bonnie snorts, then gets back control. "Aw, sorry darlin'. I'm hopped up on hateballs. It's the only way I can get enough FUCKING SPLEEN to MAKE THIS BUGGERY BOLLOCKY SCUM-SUCKING SHIP go where I tell it." She sighs and digs around the seat cushion, coming up with a puffer which she inserts briefly into the corner of each eye. The tension melts out of her skinny shoulders and corded neck as Huw watches, alarmed.

"You look like a Welsh Ghandi," she tells him, giggling. Her lips loll loose; she stands and and rolls over toward him with a half-drunken wobble. Then she throws her arms around his neck and fastens her teeth on his shoulder, worrying at his trapezium.

The teapot whistles appreciatively. Bonnie gives it a savage kick that sends it skittering back into the corridor.

"You need a wash, beautiful," she says. "Unfortunately, it's going to have to be microbial. Nearly out of fresh water. Tub's up one level."

"Gak." Huw replies.

"'Snot so bad."

"It's *bugs*," he says.

"You're hosting about three kilos of bugs right now. What're a few more? Go."

Huw picks up his sausage. "You know where we're going, right?"

"Oh aye," she says, her eyes gleaming. She whistled a snatch of "America the Beautiful."

"And you approve?"

"Always wanted to see it."

"They'll burn you at stake!"

She picks up a different puffer and spritzes each eye, then bares her teeth in a savage rictus. "I'd like to see them fucking try. BATHE, YOU CRETINOUS STENCHPOT!"

Huw settles himself among the soup of heated glass beads and bacteria and tries not to think of a trillion microorganisms gnawing away at his dried skin and sweat.

"Bastard scum bastard," he mumbles at the battered teapot — a one-time host for a cultural guidance iffrit to the People's Magical Libyan Jamahiriya, and now evidently hacked by Ade and his international cadre of merry pranksters. "Why South Carolina? G'wan, you. Why *there*, of all places?"

He isn't expecting a reply, but the teapot crackles for a moment then a translucent holo of Ade appears in the air above it, wearing a belly-dancer's outfit and a sheepish expression. "Yer wot? Ah, sorry mate. Feckin' trade union iffrit's trying to make an alpha buffer attack on my sprites." The image flickers then solidifies, this time wearing a bush jacket and a pith helmet. "Like, why South Carolina? To break the embargo, Huw. Ever since the snake-handlers crawled outta the swamps and figured the Rapture had been and gone and left 'em behind they've been waiting for a chance at salvation, so I figured I'd give them you." Ade's likeness grins wickedly as tiny red horns sprout from his forehead. "You and the backchannel to the ambassador from the Cloud. They want to meet God so bad I figured you'd maybe like to help the natives along."

"But they're radioactive!" Huw says, shaking his fist at the teapot with a rattle of yeast-scented beads. "And they're lunatics! They won't talk to the rest of the world because we're corrupt degenerate satanists, they claim sovreignty over the entire solar system even though they can't even launch a sodding rocket, and they burn dissidents to death by wiring them up to transformers! Why would I want to *help* them?"

"Because your next mission, should you choose to accept it, is to open them up to the outside universe again." Ade smirks slyly at him from atop the teapot.

"Fuck." Huw subsides in a fizzing bath of beads, with are beginning to itch. Moving them around brings relief, although it's making him a little piebald. "You want to infect the Fallen Baptist Congregations with godvomit, you be my guest — just let me get the fuck away before the shooting starts."

"That's the idea," says Ade, scratching his beard absent-mindedly. "Bonnie's one of our crack agents. We don't wanna risk one of our best prophets-at-large in a backwater, mate. You'll be safe as houses."

Huw thinks of Sandra Lal, the house of the month club, and her mini-sledge, and shudders. His arse is beginning to itch as the bacteribeads try to squeeze through his puckered ringpiece: it's time to get out. "If this goes wrong, so help me I am going to make you eat this teapot," he says, picking it up. He shakes his head, then he heads downstairs to find Bonnie again and see if she's come down far enough off the hateballs to appreciate how squeaky-clean Ade's

messiah manque is feeling.

The big zeppelin lurches and buzzes as it chases its shadow across the sandy beaches and out of control neomangrove jungle that has run wild across the gulf coast. The gasoline mangroves spin their aerofoil leaves in the breeze, harnessing the wind power and pumping long-chain terpenoids into their root systems, which ultimately run all the way to the hydrocarbon refineries near Beaufort. A long-obselete relic of the feverish cross-fertilization of the North American biotechnology biz with the dinosaurs of the petroleum age, they ought by rights to have made the US the world's biggest source of refined petrochemicals — except that since the Singularity, nobody's buying. Oil slicks glisten in the sunlight as they spread hundreds of kilometres out into the Atlantic, where they feed a whole deviant ecosystem of carbon-sequestrating petroplankton maintained by the continental quarantine authority.

Huw watches apprehensively from the observation window at the front of the bridge as Bonnie curses and swears at the iffrits, who insist that air traffic control is threatening to shoot them down if they don't steer away from the land of the Chosen People. Bonnie's verbal abuse of the ship ascends to new heights of withering scorn, and he watches her slicken her eyeballs with anger-up until they look like swollen golf-balls, slitted and watering. The ship wants to turn itself around, but she's insisting that it plough on.

"Hail ground control NOW! you fucking sad, obsolete piece of shit, so that for once, JUST! FOR! ONCE! you will have done one genuinely USEFUL! thing for SOMEONE!" she snarls with a cough, hacking up excess angry-up that has trickled back through her sinuses. She picks up the mic and begins to stalk the bridge like an attack-comedian scouting the audience for fat men with thin dates to single out in her routine.

"This is Charleston Ground Control repeating direct order to vacate sovereign Christian States of America airspace immediately or be blown out of the sky and straight to Satan. Charleston Ground Control out." The voice has the kind of robotic-slick Californian accent that tells Huw straightaway that he's talking to a missile guidance computer rather than a human being.

"HAIL! HIM! AGAIN!" Bonnie yelled, hopping from foot to foot. "Arrogant Jesus-sucking sack of SARS, scabrous toddler-fondler, religion-addled mother*fucker*," she continues, punching out with the

mic for punctuation.

"Bonnie," Huw says, quietly, flinching back from her candy-apple-red eyeballs.

"WHAT?"

"Maybe you should let me talk with them?" he says.

"I am PERFECTLY! capable of negotiating with MICROCEPHALIC! GOD! BOTHERING! LUDDITES!" she screeches.

No you're not, Huw thinks, but he doesn't even come close to saying it. In the state she's in, she could lift a car and set it down on top of a baby, a reversal of the kind of hysterical strength he's heard that mothers possess at moments of extreme duress. "Yes, you *are*," he says. "But you need to fly the ship."

She glares at him for a moment, fingernails dug so hard into her palms that drops of blood spatter to the flooring. He's sure that she's going to charge him, and then zeppelin changes direction with a lurch. So she throws the mic at his head, viciously — he ducks but it still beans him on the rebound — and goes back to screaming at the ship.

Huw staggers off the bridge and sinks back against one of the bare corridor-bulkheads — the zep that Adrian's adventurers stole is made doubly cavernous by the absense of most of its furnishings.

"This is Airship Lollipop to Charleston Ground Control requesting clearance to land in accordance with the Third International Agreement on Aeronautical Cooperation," he says into the mic, using his calmest voice. He's pretty sure he's heard of the Third International Agreement, though it may have been the Fourth. And it may have been on Aeronautical Engineering. But that there is an agreement he is sure of, and he's pretty sure that the Christian States of America is no more up to date on international affairs than he is.

"Airship Lollipop, y'all welcome to land here, but we's having trouble argumentating with this-here strategic defense battle computer that thinks y'all are goddless commie-fag euroweasels. I reckon you'se got maybe two minutes to repent before it blows y'all to Jesus."

Huw breaths a sigh of relief: at least there's a human in the loop. "How do we convince it we're not, uh, godless commie-fag euroweasels?" He asks, suppressing a twinge as he realises that in fact he and Bonnie meet about 130 percent of those criteria between them.

"That's easy, y'all just gotta have a little faith," says the airhead on the traffic control desk.

Huw grits his teeth and looks through the doorway at Bonnie, whose ears appear to be smoking. He puts ahand over the mike: "does this thing carries missiles?" he calls to her.

"FUCKING fucking arse shit bollocks —" Bonnie hammers on a control panel off to one side. It bleeps plaintively, the ancient chime of servers rebooting: "— 'ing COUNTERMEASURES suite!"

"Hasta la vista, sinners," drawls the missile launch computer in a thick gubernatorial Austro-Californian accent. Two pinpricks of light blossom on the verdant horizon of the gasoline mangroves, then a third that rapidly expands into a fireball as the antique pre-Cloud hypersonic missile bus explodes on launch. The surviving Patriots stab towards them and there's a musical chime from the countermeasures control panel. Huw feels a moment of gut-slackening terror. "You've got mail!" the countermeasures system announces in the syrupy tones of a kindergarten teacher. "AOL welcomes you to the United States of America. You have new voice mail, which will follow automatically after this message from our sponsors: click the pink furry button to access our extensive range of introductory offers, the pink fuzzy button to access our customer accounts database, the pink lozenge to see how AOL can help *you* —"

Bonnie thumps something on the panel, muscles like whipcord standing out on her arm as she glares at the oncoming missiles. Huw backs away. *She might actually be a communicant*, he realises in absolute horror. *She might actually be an AOL screen name — she's mad enough* … These days, tales of what AOL did with their users during the Singularity are commonly used to scare naughty children in Wales.

"Acknowledged," says the possessed countermeasures suite, in the hag-ridden tones of a computer that has surrendered to the dark side. For a moment nothing seems to happen, then one of the onrushing pinpricks of light veers towards the other. Paths cross then diverge in a haze of debris. "You've got mail," it sighs.

"Don't read it!" Huw screams, but he's too late — Bonnie has punched the console again, and messages begin scrolling across it. In the middle distance, Charleston airports' cracked and vitrified runways are coming into view. Missile batteries off to one side cycle their launcher-erectors impotently, magazines long since fired dry

at the robot-piloted godless commie-fag euroweasel aid flights.

"We gotta bail out before we land, otherwise we'd have to go through customs," she says brightly. "That would be bad — South Carolina never ended prohibition."

"What?" Huw shakes his head again. "Prohibition of what? What are you talking about?" His hands are shaking, he realises. "I need a drink."

"Prohibition of grass DIPSHIT," Bonnie says. She pauses for a moment, prodding at her eyes with a mister, but they are so swollen that she can't get its applicator into contact with bare mucous membrane. She roots around some more, then whacks some kind of transdermal plaster on her arm. "Sorry, gotta ARSE FUCK come down now. Your stash, darling? It's illegal here. If the customs crows catch you with it, they'll stick you on the chain gang and you'll be chibbed and FUCK RAPED BABY-EATING MURDERED by psychotic redneck klansmen for the next two hundred years. It's bad for the skin, I hear." She stands up and heads towards a battered cabinet at the rear of the bridge, which she opens to reveal a couple of grubby-looking parachutes that appear to have been carefully hand-packed by stoned marmosets. "We'll be passing over the hot tub in about three minutes. You coming?"

The parachute harness she hands him is incredibly smelly — evidently its last owner didn't believe in soap — but its flight control system assures Huw that it's in perfect working order and please to extinguish all cigarettes and switch off all electronics for the duration of flight. Tight-lipped, Huw fastens it around his waist and shoulders then follows Bonnie to the back of the bridge and down a rickety ladder to the bottom of the gas bag. There's an open hatch, and when he looks through it he sees verdant green folliage whipping past at nearly a hundred kilometres per hour, hundreds of metres below. "Clip the red hook to the blue static line eye," says the harness. "Clip the —"

"I get the picture," Huw mutters. Bonnie is already hooked up, and turns to check his rig, then gives him a huge shit-eating grin and steps backwards into the airship's slipstream. "Aagh!" Huw flinches and stumbles, then follows her willy-nilly. Seconds later the chute unfolds its wings above him and his ears are filled with the sputtering snarl of a two-stroke motor as it switches to dynamic flight and banks to follow Bonnie down towards a clearing in the mangrove swamp.

The swamp rushes up to meet him in a confusion of green, buffeting him with superheated steam as he descends toward it, so that by the time the chute punches him through the canopy he feels like a dim-sum bun. Bonnie's chute is speeding ahead of him, breaking branches off and clattering from tree to tree. He tries to follow its crazy trail as best as he can, but eventually he realizes, with a sick falling sensation in his stomach, that she's no longer strapped into it. "Bonnie!" He yells, and grabs at the throttle control.

"Danger! stall warning!" the parachute intones. "Danger! Danger!"

Huw looks down, dizzily. He's skimming the ground now, or what passes for it — muck of indeterminate depth, interspersed with clumps of curiously nibbled looking water hyacinth. The tree line starts in another couple of hundred metres, and it's wall to wall petroleum plants. Black-leafed and ominous looking, the stunted inflammabushes emit a dizzying stench of raw gasoline that makes his eyes swim and his nose water. "Fuck, where am I going to land?" he moans.

"Please fold your tray table and return your seat to the upright position," says the parachute control system. "Extinguish all joints, switch off mobile electronics, and prepare for landing." The engine note above and behind him changes, spluttering and backfiring, and then the damp muck comes up and slaps him hard across the ankles. Huw stumbles, takes a faltering step forward — then the nanolight's engine drops down as the 'chute rigging collapses above his head and thumps him right between the eyes with a hollow *tonk*.

"What you've got to understand, son," says the doctor, "is it's all the fault of the alien space bats." He holds up the horse syringe and flicks the barrel. A bubble wobbles slowly up through the milky fluid in the barrel. "If it wasn't for them, and their Jew banker patsies, we'd be ascended to heaven." He squeezes the plunger slightly and a thick blob of turbid liquid squeezes out of the syringe and oozes down the needle. "Property speculators." He grins horribly, baring gold plated teeth, and points the end of the needle at Huw's neck. Huw can't seem to move his eyes from Doc's moustache: it's huge and bushy, a hairy efflorescence that twitches supiciously as the barefoot medic inhales with sharp disapproval.

"Property speculators?" Huw's voice sounds weak, even to himself. He stares past the doctor at the peeling white paint on the

wall of this sorry excuse for a medical centre. "What have they got to do with … "

"Property speculators." Doc nods emphatically as he rams the blunt end of the quarter-inch needle against Huw's jugular. Tiny machines whine and click and the side of Huw's neck goes numb. "They bought up all the beachfront property, right? Hurricane alley. Then they vanished taking their mortgages with 'em and all the locals who'd put their savings into bank accounts and stocks and bonds were left holding the sack. Then the seas rose on account of globular incendiarism, and we got the double-whammy of the insurance corporations going bust."

Huw tries to swallow. The plunger is going down and white goo is flooding into his circulatory system, billions of feral redneck nanochines bouncing off his fur-lined arteries in search of damaged tissue to fix. His mouth is dry, his tongue as crinkly and musty-dry as a dead cauliflower. "But the, the alien —"

"Alien space bats, son," says Doc. He sighs lugubriously and pulls the syringe away from Huw's neck. "With their fancy orbital fresnel lens. *They're* behind the global warming thing, y'see, it's nothing to do with burning oil. It dates to the fifties. Those commies, they were smart — using their ballistic missile radars to signal the space brothers! We live in a strongly anthropic universe, it stands to reason there must be aliens out there. It's a long-term plot, a hundred year Communist plan to bankrupt America. And it's working. All those deserters and traitors who upped and left when the Singularity hit, they just made it worse. They're the savvy ones we need to make this country great again, rebuild NASA and Space Command and go wipe those no-good Ruskie alien space bats and their Jew banker patsies from the dark side of the moon."

Oh Jesus fuck, Huw thinks incoherently, lying back and trying to get both eyes to focus simultaneously. He still feels sick to his stomach and a bit dizzy, the way he's been since Bonnie found him neatly curled up under a gas tree with a huge lump on his head and his parachute rigging draped across the incendiary branches. "Have you seen my teapot?" he tries to say, but he's not sure it comes out right.

"You want a cup of Joe?" asks Doc. "Sure, we can do that." He pats Huw's shoulder with avuncular charm. "You jes' lie there and let my little helpers eat the blood clots in your brain for a while."

"Bonnie —" Huw whispers, but Doc is already standing and

turning towards the door at the other side of the surgery, out of his line of sight. The blow from the motor did something worse to him than concussion, and he can't seem to move his arms or legs — or neck. *I'm still breathing, so it can't be that bad*, he tells himself hopefully. *Remember, if you break your neck during a botched parachute landing and then a mad conspiracy-theorist injects black market nanomachines into you, it's highly unlikely that anything worse can happen before sundown*, he tells himself in a spirit of misplaced optimism.

And things were, indeed, looking up compared to where they'd been an hour or two ago. Bonnie had found him, still unconscious, lying at the foot of a tree that was already dribbling toxic effluent across his boots. The teapot was screaming for help at the top of its tinny electronic lungs as an inquisitive stream of brick-red ants crawled over its surface, teaming up to drag it back to one wing of the vast sprawling supercolony that owned the continent. The ants stung, really, really hard. And there were *lots* of them, like a tide sweeping over his body. It was Bonnie who'd called Doc, using some kind of insane spatchcock mobile phone jury-rigged from the wreckage of her parachute harness to broadcast for help, and it was Bonnie who'd sat beside him, whispering sweet nothings and occasionally whacking impudent formicidae, until Doc had arrived on his half-rusted swamp boat. But she'd vanished immediately afterwards, not sticking around to explain to Doc how come she and Huw were at large in the neverglades — and Doc seemed mad about that.

After a couple of hours on the operating table Huw has begun to realise that half an hour can be a very long time indeed when your only company is a demented quack and you can't even scratch your arse by way of entertainment. And his arse *itches*. In fact, it's not all that itches. Up and down his spine, little shivers of tantalizing irritation are raising goose-flesh. "Shit," he mumbles, as his left hand begins to tremble uncontrollably. The nanobots have reached the swollen, damaged tissues within his cervical vertebrae and are busily reducing the swelling. They're coaxing suicidal neurons back into cytocellular stability, laying temporary replacement links where apoptosis has already proceeded to completion, and generally wreaking the wonder of the Christopher Reeve process on Huw's supine spinal cord. For which Huw is incredibly grateful — if Doc was as nuts as he seems he might have injected a auto engine

service pack and Huw might at this very moment be gestating a pile of gleaming ceramic piston rings — but it *itches* with the fire of a thousand ants crawling inside his veins. "Arse, bugger, fuck," he moans. And then his toes begin to tremble.

By the time Doc reappears Huw is sitting up, albeit as shaky as an ethanol addict in the first week of withdrawl. He moans quietly as he accepts a chipped ceramic Exxon mug full of something dark and villainous enough that it resembles a double-foam latte, if the barrista substituted gulf crude for steamed milk. "Thanks," he manages to choke out. "I think. Do you know where Bonnie's going to be back?"

"That evil woman?" Doc cranks one eyebrow up until it teeters alarmingly. "Naw, son, you don't want to be going worrying about the likes of her. She's bad company, her and her crew — between you and me, I figure she's in league with the space bats." He chuckles humorlessly. "Naw, you'll be much better off with me'n'Sam. Ade told us all about you'n'what you're here for. We'll set you straight."

"Ade. Told you." Huw's stomach does a backflip, which feels extremely strange because something is wrong with his body image. It feels all wrong inside. He clears his throat, and almost chokes: the alien whistle-thing-communicator is gone! Then his stomach gives a warning twinge and his momentary flash of hope fades. The godvomit has simply retreated deeper into his gastrointestinal tract, hiding to bide its time like a robotic extra in a Ridley Scott movie. "How'd you know him?"

"'Cause we do a bit of business from time to time." Doc's eyebrow relaxes as he grins at Huw. "A little light smuggling, son. Don't let it get on your nerves. Ade told us what to do with you and everything's going to be just fine."

"Just fine —" Huw stops. "What are you going to do with me?" he asks suspiciously.

"Ade figures we oughta deliver you to the Baptist temple in Glory City — that's Charleston as was — in time for next Thursday's memorial service. It's the sixteenth anniversary of the Rapture, and they get kinda jumpy at this time of year." A meaty hand descends on Huw's shoulder and he looks round, then up, and up until his newly fixed neck aches at the sight of an enormous and completely hairless man with skin the colour of a dead fish and little piggy eyes. "Son, this is Sam. Say hello, Sam."

"Hello," rumbles the human mountain. Huw blinks.

"You're going to hand me over to the baptists?" he asks. "What happens then?"

"Well." Doc scratches his head. "That's up to you, isn't it?"

"But this anniversary. What do you mean, they get jumpy?"

"Oh, nothing much. Jes' sacrifice a bunch of heretics to make God notice they still b'lieve, that kinda thing. You got a problem with that?"

"Maybe." Huw licks his lips. "What if I don't want to go?"

"Well, then." Doc cocks his head to one side and squints at Huw's left ear. "Say, son, that's a mightly nice ear you've got there. Seeing as how you've not paid your medical bill, I figure we'd have to take it off you to cover the cost of your treatment. Plus maybe a leg, a kidney, and an eye or two. How about it?"

"No socialised medicine here!" rumbles Sam, as a second backhoe-sized hand closes around Huw's other shoulder.

"Okay! I'll do it! I'll do it!" Huw squeaks.

Doc beams amiably at him. "That calls for a shot of corn likker," says the medic. "I *knew* you'd see sense. Now, about the alien space bats. We've got this here telescope what Sam acquired, but we don't know how to work it proper. Have you ever used one? We're looking for the bat cave on the moon … "

Welcome to the American future, at the dusk of the twenty-first century.

The ant-colony has taken the entire Atlantic coast of the US, has marched on Georgia and west to the Mississippi. It is an anarchist colony, whose females lay eggs without regard for any notional Queen, and it has entered its eighth year of life, which is middle-aged for a normal colony, but may be just the beginning for the Hypercolony.

The God-botherers have no treaty with the ants, but have come to view them as another proof of the impending end of the world. Anything that is not contained in chink-free, seamless plastic and rock is riddled in ant-tunnels within hours. They've learned to establish airtight seals around their homes and workplaces, to subject themselves to stinging insecticide showers before clearing a vestibule, to listen for the tupperware burp whenever they seal their children in their space-suits and send them off to Bible classes.

The ants have eaten their way through most of the nematode

species beneath the soil, compromised all but the most plasticized root-systems of the sickening flora (the gasoline refining forests are curiously symbiotic with the colony — anarchist supercolonies like living cheek-by-mouth-part with a lot of hydocarbons). They've eaten the bee-hives and wasp-nests, and they've laid waste to any comestible not tinned and sealed, leaving the limping Americans with naught but a few billion tons of processed food to eat before their supply bottoms out.

The American continent is a fairy tale that the cloudmind tells itself whenever it doubts its collective decision to abandon humanity. The left-behinds there spent their lives waiting for an opportunity to pick up a megaphone and organize crews with long poles to go digging through the ruins of civilization for tinned goods. Presented with their opportunity in the aftermath of the Geek Rapture, they are happy as evangelical pigs in shit — plenty to rail against, plenty of fossil fuel, plenty of firearms.

What more could they possibly need?

Once it becomes clear that Huw is prepared to go to Glory City, the Doc comes all-over country hospitality, seeing to it that Sam gets him properly lubricated. They watch the sunset through the tupperware walls of the Doc's homestead, watch the thick carpet of ants swarming over the outer walls as they chase the last of the sun across the surface. When the sun finally sets, the sound of a billion tromping feet keeps them company.

"Well," says Doc, nodding at Sam. "Looks like it's time to hit the road."

Huw sits up straight. Glory City is *not* on his agenda, but if he's going to make a break for it, he wants to do it somewhere a bit more crowded and anonymous than here, right in the middle of Doc's home turf. Plus, he's still weak as a kitten from gasoline-tainted corn mash and the nanos' knitting at his guts.

"We'll take the bikes," Doc announces with an affable nod. "Go get 'em, Sam."

Sam thuds off towards an outbuilding, the plasticized floors dimpling under his feet.

"He's a good boy," says Doc. "But I figure I used too many cognitive enhancements on him when he was a lad. Made him *way* too smart for his own good."

Sam returns with a serious-looking anime-bike dangling from

each hand. "alt.pave-the-earth," he says, setting them down. His voice is bemused, professorial. "I'll go get the sidecar."

"He'll need a spacesuit," Doc calls after him. "What're you, about a medium?"

Huw, staring wordlessly at the stretched and striated bikes with their angular mouldings, opens his mouth. "I'm a 107 centimeter chest," he replies vaguely.

"Ah, we don't go in for that centimeter eurofaggotry around here, son. Don't really matter much. Spacesuits never fit too good. You'll get used to it. It's only six hours."

Sam returns with a low-slung sidecar under one arm and a suit of Michelin-Man armor over his shoulders.

"It's very ergonomic," he rumbles tectonically as he sits the suit down next to Huw's folding lawn-chair, then goes to work attaching the car to one of the bikes.

Huw fumbles with the michelin suit, eventually getting the legs pulled on.

"Binds a bit at the crotch," he says, hoping for some sympathy.

"Yeah, it'll do that," says Doc.

Huw modestly turns his back and reaches down to adjust himself. As he does so he fumbles with the familiar curve of the brass teapot. Peeking down he sees a phosphorescent miniature holographic Ade staring back up at him.

"Sharper than a trouser-snake's tooth," Adrian hisses.

Huw puts his hand where he'd expect to find a pocket and a little hatch pops open, exposing a hollow cavity in the thigh. Quickly, he slips the teapot into it and dogs the hatch shut. "I'm ready, I think," he says, turning round again.

Doc and Sam have already suited up; they're waiting impatiently for Huw to catch up. The bikes are bolted either side of the sidecar, and Doc waves Huw into the cramped seat. Waddling in the suit, clutching a portable aircon pack, Huw has a hard time climbing in. Everything sounds muffled except the whirr of the helmet fans, and a pronounced smell of stale gotchis and elderly rubber assaults his nose periodically, as if the suit is farting in his face. "Let's go," Sam rumbles, and they kick off towards the doorway, which irises open to admit a trickling rain of ants as the bikes roar and spurt gouts of flame against the darkness.

The jet-engine roar of the engines doesn't die down, nor does the laser-show strobing off the organic LED pixelboards on the outsized

fuel-tanks, but still, somehow, Huw snoozes through the next couple of hours in a moonshine-assisted haze. Doc is rambling at length about some recondite point of randite ideology, illuminating his own rugged self-reliance with the merciless glare of A-is-A objectivist clarity, but after a few minutes Huw discovers two controls on his chest plate that raise his opinion of the suit designers: a drinking straw primed with white lightning, and the volume control on the radio. As his sort-of jailers pedal away, driving him along a pot-holed track lined with the skeletons of dead trees, he kicks back and tries to get his head together. If it wasn't for the eventual destination he could almost begin to enjoy himself, but there's a nagging sense of weirdness in his stomach (where the godvomit still nestles, awaiting a communicative impulse) and he can't help worrying about what he'll do once they get to Glory City.

An indeterminate time passes, and Huw is awakened by a sharp prodding pain near his bladder. "Uh." He lolls in the suit, annoyed.

"Psst, keep it quiet. They think you're sleeping." The prodding sensation goes away, replaced by a buzzing voice from just north of his bladder.

"Ade?" Huw whispers.

"No, it's the tooth fairy. Listen, have you seen Bonnie?"

"Not lately. She went for —" Huw pauses. "You know I landed bad?"

"Shit." Ade pauses. "So that's what you're with Doc for. Have they got her?"

"I don't think so." Huw desperately wants to scratch his head in puzzlement but his arms are folded down inside the sidecar and he doesn't dare let Sam or Doc figure he's awake. "Look, I woke up and the doctor — *is* he a real doc? — was trying to fix my neck. A motor fell on my head. Bonnie got him to help but then she left and I haven't seen her. Went off on an errand or something."

"Shit and double-shit." Ade's tinny voice sounds upset. "They're not trustworthy, mate. Sell you as soon as look at you, those two. She *said* you were hurt, but —"

"You don't know where she is, either," Huw accuses.

"Nope." They ride along in near silence for a while.

"What's the big idea?" Huw asks, trying to sustain a sense of detachment. "Packing me off to bongo-bongo land to convert the cannibals is all very fucking well, but I thought you said this would

be safe as houses?"

"Um well, there's been a kinda technical hitch in that direction," Adrian says. "But we'll get that sorted out, don't you worry yer little head over it. Main thing is, you don't wanna stay with the randroids any longer than you got to, got that? Anyway, I'm sure you can show 'em a clean pair of heels, mate. When you get to Glory City, head for the John the Baptist Museum of Godless Evolution and make your way to the Steven Jay Gould Lies and Blasphemy Exhibit. There's a trapdoor under the *Hallucigena* mock-up leading to an atheist's hole and if you get there I'll send someone to pick you up. 'Kay?"

"Wait —" Huw says, but he's too late. The buzzing stops, just as Doc reaches over and cuffs Huw around the helmet. "What?" Huw cranks the volume on his suit radio.

" — said, you paying attention, boy?" Doc demands. There's a suspicious gleam in his eye, although Huw isn't certain it isn't just the effect of looking at him through a thin layer of toughened glass across which stray a handful of very lost ants.

"I was asleep," Huw protests.

"Bah." Doc rubs off the ants, then grabs the brakes. "Well, son, I was just saying: only a couple of hours now until we get there… "

The road is unlit and there's little traffic. What there is seems to consist mostly of high-tech bicycle rickshaws retrofitted for unapologetic hydrocarbon combustion, and ancient rusting behemoth pick-ups that belch thick blue petroleum smoke — catalytic converters and fuel cells being sins against man's deity-designated dominance over nature. The occasional wilted and ant-nibbled wreaths plaintively underscore the messages on the tarnished and bullet-speckled road signs: KEEP RIGHT and SLOW TRUCKS.

The landscape is dotted with buildings that have the consistency of halvah or very old cheddar. These are the remains of man's folly and his pride, now bored out of 90 percent of their volume to fill the relentless bellies of the Hypercolony. Individually, the ants crawling across his faceplate, along his guantlets, over the sexy sizzle of the LEDs and crisped up in a crust around the flame-nozzles appear to be disjointed and uncoordinated. But now, here, confronted with the evidence of the Hypercolony's ability to energize collective action out of its atomic units, Huw is struck with

a deep, atavistic terror. There is an Other here, loose on the continent, capable of bringing low all that his kind has built. Suddenly, Huw's familiar corporeality, the source of so much personal pride, starts to feel like a liability.

The aircon unit makes a sputtery noise that Huw feels rather than hears through the cavaties of the michelin-suit. He's tried wiggling its umblicus in its suit-seal, but now the air coming out of it is hot and wet and smells of burning insulation. He's panting and streaming with sweat by the time the dim white dome of Glory City swims out of the darkness ahead to straddle the road like a monstrous concrete carbuncle. Sam guns the throttle like a tireless robot, while Doc snores in the sidecar, his mouth gaping open beneath his moustache, blurred behind the ant-crawling lexan of his faceplate. "How much longer?" he gasps, the first words he's spoken in an hour.

"Three miles. Then we park up and take a room for the night in Saint Pat's Godly Irish Motel. No smoking, mind," Sam adds. "They don't take to the demon weed."

Huw stares in grim, panting silence as they take the uphill slope towards the base of the enormous, kilometers-high Fuller dome that caps the former city. Impregnated with neurotoxins, the dome is the ultimate defense against ants. They ride into the city past a row of gibbeted criminals, their caged bones picked clean by ants, then into the deserted and enormous airlock, large enough to accomodate an armoured batallion. What Huw initially takes for an old-fashioned air-shower turns out to be a gas chamber, venting something that makes his throat close when he gets a hint of a whiff of it through the suit's broken aircon. After ten minutes of gale-force nerve-gas, most of the ants are washed away, and those that remain appear to have died. Sam produces a stiff whisk broom and brushes him free of the few thousand corpses that have become anchored by their mouth-parts to his suit, with curious gentleness, and then hands him the whisk so that he may return the favor. Then the inner doors to Glory City open wide, sucking them into the stronghold of the left-behind.

Once inside the dome, Huw finds that Glory City bears little resemblance to any streaming media representations of pre-singularity NorAm cities he's ever seen. For one thing the roads are narrow and the buildings tall, leaning together like a sinister crowd of drunkards, the olde-world olde-town feel revived to make

maximum use of the cubic volume enclosed by the dome. For another thing, about half the tallest buildings seem to be spiky towers, like the old mediaeval things back home that he associates with seamy nightclubs. It takes him a moment to realise: *those are churches*! He's never imagined so many temples existing before, let alone in a single city.

The next thing he notices are the adverts. Everywhere. On billboards and paving stones and the sides of parked monster trucks. Probably tattooed on the hides of the condemned prisoners outside, before the ants ate them. Half the ads seem to be public service announcements, and the other half seem to be religious slogans, and some are in-between: ENJOY HOST ON A SHINGLE: COMMUNION WITH ZEST HALF THE CALORIES LOWER GLYCEMIC INDEX! Whichever they are, they set his teeth on edge — so that he's almost happy when Sam steers him into a cramped parking lot behind a tall gray slab of concrete and grunts, "this is the motel."

It's about two in the morning, and Huw catches himself yawning as Sam shakes Doc awake and extracts him from the sidecar. "C'mon in," says Doc. "Let's get some sleep. Got a long day tomorrow, son."

The lobby of the motel is guarded by a fearsome-looking cast-iron gate. Huw unlatches his faceplate and heaves a breath: the air is humid and warm, cloying and laden with decay as sweet as a rotting tooth. Doc approaches the concierge's desk while Sam hangs back, one meaty hand gripping Huw's arm proprietorily. "Don't you go getting no clever ideas," Sam rumbles quietly. "Doc tagged you with a geotracker chip. You go running away, you'll just get him riled."

"Uh. Okay." Huw gulps.

Doc is at the desk, talking to a woman whose long black dress is like a throwback to the puritan colony days and who wears a bonnet that looks like it's nailed to her head. She's *old*, showing the distressing signs of physical senescence. "Twenty cents for the suite," she says loudly, "and fifteen for the pen." (Deflation has taken its toll on the once-mightly dollar.) She wags a wrinkled finger under Doc's nose: "and none o'your filth!"

Doc draws himself up to his full height. "I assure you, I am here to do the Lord's work," he tells her icily. "Along with this misguided creep. And my assistant."

Sam pushes Huw forward. "Doc gets the presidential suite

whenever he stays here," he says. "You get to sleep in the pen."

"The… ?"

"'Cause we don't rightly trust you," Sam says, pushing Huw towards a side-door behind the reception area. "So a little extra security is called for."

"Oh —" Huw says, and stops. Oh, really now, Huw would say, except that now the Doc is back with a squeeze-bottle of something liquid and so cold that it is fogged with a rime of condensation. Huw's dryth of throat manifests, and the gob in his mouth has the viscosity of rubber-sap.

"Thursday, Son?" the Doc says, playfully jetting a stream of icy liquid in the air.

"Ahhh," Huw says, nodding vigorously. Six hours in the suit with nothing but highly diruetic likker and any number of hours of direct sunlight in its insulated confines after the aircon broke down — he's so dehydrated he's ready to piss snot.

"This a-way," the Doc says, and beckons with the bottle.

Huw lets Sam help him climb out of the sidecar and barely notices the rubbery feeling of his legs after hours of being cramped up in the little buggy. "Hotcha," the Doc says, "come on now, time's a wastin'." He gives the bottle another squeeze and water spatters the dusty ground.

"Aaah," Huw agrees, lumbering after it. He's never felt quite this thirsty in all his days.

The Doc heads for a staircase behind a row of suppository-shaped elevator cages, standing open and gleaming in scratched plastic dullness by the diffuse white light of the holy sodiums overhead. Huw can barely keep up, but even if he had to drop to his knees and crawl, he'd do it. That's holy stuff, that water, infused with the numinous glow of life itself. Did't the Christians have a hymn about it, "Jesus Gave Me Water?" Huw comes from a long line of trenchant black country atheists, a man who takes to religion the way that vegans take to huge suspicious Polish sausages that look like cross-sectioned dachshundts, but he's having an ecstatic experience right now, taking the stairs on trembling knees.

The Doc spits on his thumb and smears the DNA across the auth-plate set in the door at the bottom of the stairs. It thinks for a long moment, then clanks open in a succession of matrioshkoid armour layers.

"G'wan now, you've earned it, the Doc says, rolling the bottle into

the cell behind the door.

Huw toddles after it, the michelin suit making him waddle like he's got a load in his diaper, but he can't be arsed worrying about that right now because there's a bottle of water with his name on it at the other side of the cell, a bottle so cold and pure that it cries out to him: *drink me! Drink me!*

He's sucking it down, feeling the cold straight through to his skull-bone, a delicious brain freeze the size of the Universe, when the teapot rattles angrily in his thigh pocket. The sound is getting him down, distracting him from the sense of illumination appearing at the back of his mind's eye as he gulps the water, so he pulls the thing out and looks at it, relaxing as he sees the shiny metal highlights gleaming happily at him.

Adrian pops out of the teapot, so angry he's almost war-dancing, and he curses. "Fucking suggestibility ray — Bible-thumping pud-fuckers can't be happy unless they've tasped someone into ecstasy. Come on, Huw, snap out of it."

"Go 'way," Huw mumbles irritably, "m'havin' a trash-transcential-transcendential 'sperience here." He gulps some more water then squats, leaning against the wall. Something *loves* him, something vaster than mountains and far stronger, and it's bringing tears to his eyes. Except the teapot will have none of it.

"Fucking wake up! Jesus, didn't they tell you *anything* in class when you was a kid? They infuse your cerebrospinal fluid with nanobots that have a built-in tropism for the god module in your temporal lobe. Tickle it with a broadband signal and you'll see God, angels square-dancing in heaven, fuck knows what. Get a grip on yourself!"

"It's God." Huw's got a name for the sensation now, and he grins idiotically at the opposite wall of his cell. It's a slab of solid aluminium, scratched and dented and discoloured along the welds: and it's as beautiful to Huw as fluted marble pillars supporting the airy roof of a pleasure dome, pennants snapping overhead in the delightful breeze blowing off the waters of the underground river Alph —

"It's not God, it's a fucking tasp! Snap out of it, dipshit, They're only using it on you 'cause they want you nice and addled for the Inquisition tomorrow! Then, no more God module!"

"Huh?" Huw ponders the question for an eternity of proximate grace, as serried ranks of angels blow trumpets of glory in the

distant clouds that wreath his head. "I'm … no, I'm happy. This way. I've found it."

"What you've found is a bullet in the back of the head if you stay here, fuckwad!" Ade shakes his fists from the top of the teapot. "Think, damn you! What would you have thought of this yesterday?"

"Yesterday?" Yesterday, all his troubles, so far away. Huw nods, thinking deeply. "I've always been missing 'thing like this, even f'I'didn't know it. Feels *right*. Everything makes sense." The presence of the ultimate, even if it's coming from right inside his own skull courtesy of a 5.4 gigahertz transmission from Godbotherer Central, is making it hard for Huw to concentrate on anything else. "Wanna be like this 'til I die, if's all the same to you."

"They'll *kill* you, man!" Ade pauses in his frantic fist-waving. "Doesn't that mean something to you?"

"Mmf. Lemme think about it." Huw slowly slumps back against the wall, his suit bulking and billowing around him and digging sharp joints into his bruised body, sanctifying and mortifying his flesh. "If I believed in an actual, like, *God*, this'd'be marvellous. But God's such a goddamned primitive fetish, isn't it? So'm'a, an atheist. Always have been, always will be. But this thing is like, *inside* me, and it's huge, so enormous and blindingly brilliant it's like my own reflection on infinity." His eyes widen. "Hey, that means *I'm* a god. I'm like, transcendentistry, right? I think therefore I guess I *am*. If they try to shoot me I'll just zap 'em with my god-powers." He giggles for a while, pointing his fingers at the ceiling, walls and floor, lightning bolts of the illuminated imagination spraying every which way. "It's a solipsystem! Nobody here but me. *I* am god. I *am* god. I am *god* —"

The teapot zaps him with an electric shock as Ade vanishes in a huff.

"Ouch." Huw sucks his thumb for a moment and meditates on the cellestial significance of the autodeity sending him messages from his subconscious via a curved metal antiquity stuffed with black-market Libyan electronics. Then he tucks it away in his pocket and settles back down to work hard on regaining his sense of omnipotent brilliance. And he's still sitting in that pose the next morning, staring at the wall, when the sense of immanence vanishes, the doors grind open, and Doc and Sam come to take him downtown to face the Inquisition.

They parade him down the road in the drab grey morning light of Glory City, past the filling-stations, the churches, the diners, the other filling stations, the refinery, the filling-station-memorabilia market, the GasHaus, the corkscrew apartment blocks where every neighbor can look in on every other's window, and the execution ground.

And it all feels good to Huw.

As the parade progresses, curious locals emerge from their homes and workplaces as if drawn by some ultrawideband alert, rounded up and herded out to form a malignant rent-a-mob that demonstrates to Huw how important and central to reality he is. They pelt him with rotting fruit and wet cigar stubs with live coals on one end that singe him before bouncing free to the impermeable pavement, affirming his sense of holy closeness with the intensity of their focus on him. Once, they stop so that the Doc can roar a speech at the crowd —

"— heretic — vengeance — drugs — sex — wantonness —"

Huw doesn't pay much attention to the speech. Through his feet he fancies he can feel the scritterscratch of the Hypercolony, gnawing patiently at the yards of stone and polymer between him and the blighted soil. It's a bad feeling, as if Glory City is a snow-globe that has been lifted into the air on the backs of a heptillion ants who are carrying it away, making it sway back and forth. The curlicue towers and the gnarled and crippled crowd rock in hincky rhythm.

The faces on the balconies swim when he looks up. Some of them have horns on their foreheads. He turns away and tries to stare at a fixed point, using the ballerina's trick of keeping his gaze still to make the world stop its whirling, but his gorge is rising, and his stomach is threatening to empty down his front.

This is not good.

He sits down hard, his armored ass klonking on the pavement, and Sam lumbers toward him. Huw holds out his hand, wanting to be helped to his feet, back to the godhead and the good trip. Just as Sam's fingertips graze his, a woman wearing a voluminous black gown dashes out of the crowd and snatches him under the armpits, looping a harness around his chest. Where it touches his back it gloms on hard, hyperglue nanites welding it to the suit's surface.

"Hold on," Bonnie hisses in his ear, and he feels like weeping,

because he knows he isn't to be redeemed after all, but tediously rescued and rehabilitated and set free.

"Bitch harlot!" screeches Doc. "Sodomite! Stop her!" Sam grabs for her past Huw's shoulder, sideswipes the rounded swell of her bosom — extensively, chastely covered, this being Glory City — and jerks his hand back as though he'd been burned.

The harness around Huw's chest tightens with rib-bruising force and he's dragged backwards, skittering over the roadway before the harness lofts them both into the air, up toward the balconies ringing the curlicue towers. Bonnie, who is tied off to him by a harness of her own, squints nervously down at the crowd receding below them.

Huw bangs chest-first into the side of one of the towers, Bonnie's weight knocking the breath out of him. They dangle together, twirling in the breeze like a giant booger as strong hands hoist them bodily up and over a balcony, then inside, adding insult to injury in the form of an atomic wedgie. Bonnie scrambles in after him, unlocks her harness, and shakes out her voluminous petticoats. Huw is still dazed from the flight and gasping for breath. He's bent over double, trying to breathe perfumed air thick with musky incense.

"You all right?"

Huw forces himself to straighten up and look around. The room is a tribute to excess: the wallpaper is printed with gold and red and black tesselations — obscene diagrams, he realises, interpenetrating and writhing before his eyes — and the sofa is flocked with crushed purple velvet. The coffee-table supports a variety of phallic implements in an assortment of improbable colours, suited to an altogether different kind of inquisition than the one that he'd been headed for.

As for the furniture, it's inhabited by several persons of indeterminate gender, wearing outfits ranging from scanty to inappropriate for a place of worship — underwear is in fashion but not much else is.

Bonnie's face swims into focus before him, her blue fringe brushing his forehead: that and her hands are the only parts of her body he can see. "It's the gnostic sexual underground," she hisses. "There's always one to be had, if you know how to look. Nobody takes it up the tradesman's like a man with religion. No one needs it more, either. These lucky folks just figured out how to square the circle, thanks to the Bishop."

She gives him a hard shake. "Come on," she says. "I hit you with enough seratonin reuptake blockers to depress a hyena." He feels a hard tug at his throat and she holds up a small blowdart for him to examine. "I *know* you're out of the god-box."

Huw opens his mouth to say something, and finds himself sobbing. "You took away my god-self," he manages to say, snotting down his beard and horking back briny mouthfulls of tears and mucus.

Bonnie produces a hankie from up one sleeve of her church-modest gown and wipes his face. "Sha," she says, stroking his hair. "Sha. Huw, I need you here and now, OK? We're in a *lot* of trouble and I can't get us out on my lonesome. The god feeling was just head-in-a-jar stuff. You weren't being god, you were feeling the feeling of being god. You hate that — it's how they feel in the cloud, once they've uploaded."

Huw snuffled. "Yeah," he says.

"Yeah. Baby, I'm sorry, I know it hurts, but it's how you want to live. If I know one person who's equipped to cope with the distinction between sensation and simulation, it's you. Jesus, Huw, other than these maniacs, you're the only person I know who thinks there *is* a distinction."

Huw struggles to his feet and teeters in his ridiculous trousers. Bonnie giggles.

"What *are* you *wearing*?" she asks.

Huw manages to crack a fractional smile. "They're all the rage in the American Outback," he says. "What's that *you're* wearing?"

"A disguise. Doubles as a biohazard shield." She swivels her hips, setting twenty kilograms of underskirts swishing. "We're both a bit over-dressed for the occasion; let's skin off and I'll introduce you to the Bishop. Go on, you get started."

Huw begins the laborious unlatching process and gradually shucks the pants. The teapot clatters free, drawing a raised eyebrow from one of the sexually ambiguous catamites twined around a sofa arm. The vibration kicks some erratic connection back into life: Ade's image glows softly through the deep pile carpet.

The little avatar wrinkles its nose. "Bugger me sideways," says Ade. "Place looks like an Italian whorehouse, minus the charm and hygiene." He turns and looks Huw up and down. "You look a little more like your usual cheerless self, though, mate. Should I assume that you've joined us again in the land of the independently

cognited?"

Huw nods miserably. "I'm back," he says. "No thanks to you. Those two assholes know you — they do business with you!"

Adrian's avatar has the good grace to look faintly embarrassed. Bonnie leans past Huw with a creak of whalebone and picks up the teapot. "Did I hear that right?" she asks menacingly. "You been selling *stuff* again?"

"Uh." Ade looks unrepentant. "Yeah, I guess so."

"What kind of *stuff*?" Bonnie hisses, her eyes narrowing.

"Um … stuff. Mostly harmless."

"What *kind* of mostly harmless stuff are we talking about here?" Huw asks, mustering up a faint echo of interest. The blissed-out resistance cadre on the sofa are showing signs of interest, too.

"Oh, the usual, sunshine. Telescope lenses, tinfoil hats — okay, Faraday cage helmets — formicide spritzes, tactical nuclear weapons, bibles, tinned spam, that kind of thing."

"And in return they're paying you in —" Huw begins, then Bonnie interrupts him.

"— No, wait. What else are you smuggling, you rat bastard? Don't try to hide it from me. Those neverglade-living low-lives were so eager to hand Huw over to the Fallen Congregations that they had to be trying to cover something up. Like, oh, whatever the fuck you were doing with them. What was it, Ade? Resurrection on the installment plan? Banned downloads? Are we going to get that fucking mad crow descending on us?"

"Oh, I say!" someone says from behind her, but Bonnie is so worked up she doesn't notice. Huw glances over his shoulder and sees one of the miscellaneous perverts standing nearby, a hand clasped over his/her mouth. The perv is fish-belly pale and wears nothing but very complicated underwear. "Did you say —"

"Just a few small downloads, lass," Ade says cheerfully. "Nothing to get worked up about, keep your hair on."

"Downloads. Shit." Bonnie breathes deeply. She's looking pale. "Shit, that's all I need," she says. She puts the teapot down. "Right, we'll have to take this up later, Huw. Right now we've got to go see the Bishop, and that means skin. Help me out of this thing."

Huw fumbles for a while with the complex catches and clasps on her dress, fuzzily aware that he's standing very close to her and he's not wearing any trousers. As she steps out of her costume she grabs him around the waist, squeezes him tight, and kisses him fiercely on

the mouth. She's nervous, vibrating like a live wire, and something squirms around in his throat, wanting to comfort her. "Why do we have to be naked?" he asks when she surfaces for air. "Who is this Bishop, anyway?"

"The Bishop runs the First Church of the Teledildonic. It's a dissident: lives in a baptismal pond, says we've got it all wrong and time is flowing in reverse. We've passed the Tower of Babel — that's the cloud — and the Flood — warming — and now we're ready to move back into the Garden of Eden. So we've got to stop wearing clothes and start fucking like bunnies."

"But —" Huw can feel his brain trying to twist out through his ears as he tries to accomodate this deviant theology to what he knows about the Fallen Baptist Congregations — "what's that got to do with anything? With these folks?"

"I say, hold it right there, pardner!" says the pale perv, running drowned-looking hands through his/her long green hair. The effect would almost be sexy if not for the medium-sized pot belly and the black rubber hedgehog-apparatus that conceals his/her crotch, studded with silvery transducers: "You've got it all wrong!" He/she waves a finger at Bonnie. "This isn't the Garden of Eden, it's the Garden of the Son of God, after the rapture, the hundred and forty-four thousand saved souls living in paradise on Earth, free from sin —"

"What's *that*, then?" asks Huw, rudely prodding in the direction of the strap-on.

The perv draws itself up to a haughty metre-fifty: "I'll have you know that this is the finest model *chastity phallus* money can buy," s/he says, voice cracking and descending an octave: "'s got all the sensory inputs of the real thing, wired right into my spine, but because little feller himself is tucked out of sight behind it there's no actual genital contact. No skin, no sin." He fondles the thing happily and shudders. Another of the prosthetically enhanced worshipers is sitting up on the sofa behind him and showing signs of interest.

Huw backs away slowly. "Get me out of here," he mouths at Bonnie. She nods, then reaches out and strokes the perv's pristine love machine. "*Now*." Bonnie leads him around the perv — who doubles -over in ecstasy at her touch — towards a pair of pornographically decorated hardwood doors at the rear of the room.

Bonnie takes a deep breath. "Wish I could stay," she calls to the three or four temple whores on the bed, "but we've got to see their Grace. It's urgent. If I were you, I'd get to a safe house before the gendarmes arrive."

"Give him our love," one of the omnisexuals calls behind them. They board a lift that runs sideways, down, up, and then sideways again, through a route that sends Huw's inner ear on a loop-de-loop. They emerge into a hallway that's carpeted with greasy-feeling tentacles that twine sensuously around his toes, and the walls have the sheen of waxed and oiled skin. The whole thing has the smell of Doritos and musk.

Bonnie hands him the sack with her clothes and his ruined underpants and the teapot and pushes him ahead of her, squeezing his ass affectionately as they go.

The Bishop is three meters high, ten-limbed, with eight complete sets of assorted genitals, fourteen breasts, four tongues, and is impossibly hideous to contemplate. Bonnie ushers him into its presence after dickering with a pair of disturbingly toothless ministers who bar the high door.

"Your Grace," she says, as they step into its eucalyptus-fumed inner chamber.

"My dear child," it says, with one of its mouths. "It warms Our heart to see you." It has a voice like a teenaged boy, high and uncertain. "And your companion. You are both lovely as they day He made you."

One of its hands slithers free of the tangle and extends before them. Bonnie bends down and kisses the ring painted on the third finger, then elbows Huw, who kneels tentatively and takes the proffered digit, which is warm and moist and pulses disturbingly.

"Your Grace?" he says.

"Be not afraid, child," the Bishop says. "This meatsuit allows Us to bring the Word to Our scattered temples without having to transport Our physical person through the uncertain world. One day, all of us will be liberated by these meatsuits, free to explore our flesh in many bodies all at once."

"You're *uploaded*?" Huw says, drawing his hand back quickly and shuffling back on his knees.

The Bishop snorts a laugh with its rightmost face. "No, child, no. Merely telepresent. Uploading is the mortification of the flesh —

this is its *celebration*."

"Your Grace," Bonnie says, peering up at it through her fringe with her eyes seductively wide. "It has been an honor and privelege to serve you in my time here in Glory City. I've found my counselling duties to be very rewarding — the gender-reassignees here face unique challenges and it's wonderful to be able to help them."

"Yes," the Bishop said, crouching down. "And We've appreciated it very much. But We sense that you are here to ask some favor of Us now, and We wish you'd get on with it so that We could concentrate on the savage rogering we're getting in one of Our bodies."

"It's complicated," Bonnie said. "This guy here is on the run — he was headed for the auto-da-fe when I rescued him."

"This is the One?" the Bishop said, putting one delicate feminine hand behind his head and pulling him closer to its big golden eyes. "The two who brought you to Glory City are not know for their extreme piety," it says. "So why do you suppose they brought you here, rather than simply, oh, eating you or using you for spare parts?"

Huw keeps himself from shying back with an effort of will. "I don't *know*," he says. Bonnie crowds in to another one of the Bishop's faces. Deep within him, Huw feels a shiver of golden light, the god-feeling.

"I think my downers are wearing off."

"They tasped him, so I hit him with some depressants," Bonnie says.

"Feels *goooooood*," Huw says.

"It does, doesn't it?" the Bishop says. "I favor three or four hours on the tasp myself, twice a week. Does wonders for the faith. But I suppose we'd best keep your ecstasy under control for now. Phillida!" it calls, clapping two of its hands together, bringing one of the ministers running. It twines an arm between the guardian's legs and murmurs, "Bring Us a freethinker's cap, will you?" The minister's toothless maw gapes open in ecstasy, and then it scurries off quickly, returning with a mesh balaclava that the Bishop fits to Huw's head, lining up the eye- and mouth-holes.

Huw's golden glow recedes.

"It's a Faraday cage with some noise-cancellation built in to reverse any of the mind-control rays that do get through," the Bishop says. "How did you come to be on the American Continent,

anyway?"

"It started when I ate some godvomit and smuggled it out of a patent court," Huw says.

The Bishop's golden eyes widen. "Judge Rosa Guilliani's court? In Libya? Last week? You are carrying the Ambassador?"

"The very same," Huw says, obscurely pleased at this notoriety. "It wasn't my idea, believe me. Anyway, this smuggler I know — we know — Adrian, he sent me here. Said that this was the safest place to hide out."

Bonnie breaks in. "But now we come to find out that he's been dealing with the two who tasped Huw —"

"Sam and the Doc," Huw says.

"I know of them," the Bishop says.

"Selling them bootleg downloads from the Cloud."

"Ahh," the Bishop says. "Excuse Us a moment." It arches its back and screams out a long orgasmic wail. "One of Our other meatsuits is being ministered to," it says distractedly, "and We needed to have a bit of a shout.

"We're pleased to know this. It explains certain pseudo-nuclear events in the outback that We've had word of — the Doc must be retailing anti-ant technology to the other hillbillies."

Bonnie shuddered. "That's just for openers, I'm sure. Fuck knows what else Ade has sold those nutjobs."

"Just some downloads, he said," Huw mumbles. "Fuck it, what did he mean by *that*? You can download anything; I know I did!"

"Downloads could be either good or bad," the Bishop muses aloud, rubbing two disturbingly rugose limbs together slowly. "But first, We have more pressing temporal priorities to attend to, my children. It appears that your rescue did not go unnoticed by the puritan majority, and they will presently be calling. Moreover, this would explain a request for a flight plan and landing clearance that the airport acknowledged four hours ago —" the Bishop stops, its back arching ecstatically — "oh! Oh! *OH!* Closer to thee, my God!" Breasts quiver, their purple aureolae crinkling, and it screams out loud in the grip of a multiple orgasm of titanic proportions.

Huw peers out through the eye-holes of his mesh mask, which presses cold and hard into his skin. "Did you say that the law is nearby?"

"I believe they are," the Bishop says. "Yes, there. The primary perimeter has been breached. Such a lovely front door." It looks

sternly at Bonnie. "You were reckless, child. They followed you here."

"I took every precaution," Bonnie says, blushing. "I'm no amateur, you know —"

Huw has a sudden sickening feeling. "It's me," he says. "I'm bugged with a geotracker."

Bonnie glares at him. "You could have *said something,* she snaps. "We've compromised the whole operation here now."

"I was *distracted*, all right? Mind-control rays make you forgetful, *Okay?*"

The Bishop clucks its tongues and gives them each a pat on their bare bottoms. "Never mind that now, children. All is forgiven. But I'm afraid that you are right, we are going to lose this temple. And I'm no more infallible than you, you know: I've been ever so lax with the evacuation drills here. My ministers find that they disturb their contemplation of the Almighty. I fear not for this meatsuit, but it would be such a shame to have all my lovely acolytes fall into the hands of the Inquisition. I don't suppose that you'd be willing to help out?"

"Of course," Bonnie says. "It's the least we can do."

No, the least we could do would be to get the fuck out, Huw thinks. He glares at Bonnie, who prods him in the belly with a fingertip.

"But of course, we could also use some help of our own —"

"Quid pro quo?" the Bishop says, its quavering voice bemused now, and that irritates Huw ferociously: the law is at the door, and the Bishop thinks it's all a tremendous lark?

"Not at all, your Grace. We came to beg your indulgence long before we knew that there was a favor we could do for you. We need your assistance getting shut of this blighted wasteland. Transport to the coast, and an airship or a ballistic or *something* that can get us back to the civilized world."

"And I need to shut down my geotracker," Huw says, wondering where it has been implanted. Somewhere painful, Sam had told him.

"Yes, you certainly do," the Bishop says. "You'll find an escape-line clipped to the balcony out the third door on the right, along with some baskets. Pack the ministers in the baskets, tie them down (don't mind if they squirm, it's in their nature), clip the baskets to the line and toss them out the window — I'm making arrangements now for someone to catch them on the other end. If you do this

small favor for me, I will, oh, I don't know." The Bishop idly strokes their scalps and tickles their earlobes. "Yes, that's it. There's a safe house on the coast, a farm where my people have been making preparations for a much more reasonable approach to dealing with the ants than godvomit and nukes. They will be delighted to shelter you for as long as it takes you to make contact with your people and get off the continent. Such a shame to see you go." It quickly gives Bonnie directions, and Bonnie recites them back with mnemonic perfection.

There's a distant crash that Huw feels through the soles of his bare feet. "Clothes?" he asks.

"Oh, yes, I suppose, by all means, if you must," the Bishop says. "Cloakroom's behind the last door on the right. A lost and found for supplicants who've left a little something behind in their blissful state as they left our place of worship. I'm sure we'll have something in your size, even if it's only Osh Kosh, b'gosh."

"Fanfuckingtastic," Huw says and starts for the door, but Bonnie catches him.

"How many to evacuate? I want to be sure we don't miss anyone." There's another thunderous crash, this one from closer by.

The Bishop's eyes roll back into its head, then flip down. "A dozen on the premises, not counting the ones that were on the front door. It seems they've been liquidated already."

"Shit. What'll we —" Huw dithers for a moment but Bonnie is already heading for the cloakroom door.

"Over here!" She thrusts a bundle of clothing at him. "Quick. Let's go get the ministers —"

Huw pauses while balanced on one leg, the other thrust down one limb of a pair of denim coveralls. "Do we have to?" he asks.

"Yes we fucking do," Bonnie says.

Huw sees a machine like a big industrial clothes dryer just inside the cloakroom doorway. "Quick. Help me into this thing."

"What —"

"My ass, or as much of it as fits. It's an old RFID zapper, you used to get them where corporatist dissidents met and this place looks like an old Friends meeting hall."

"RFID zapper?" Bonnie squints at it dubiously.

Huw cups one hand around his crotch. "It's either that or you take a knife to my scrotum." Bonnie shudders. "It's OK," Huw says. "Just cos we're Luddites, doesn't mean we don't cook good technology."

Huw sits down hastily and gestures at a big red switch on the side of the machine. She flips it. Nothing seems to happen, except a green LED comes on. "Okay, fingers crossed, that *should* do it." He's relieved to have finally made some kind of contribution to the effort.

Bonnie helps him out. "Right, get that jacket fastened we are going to hit the garage just as soon as we've defenestrated the perverts." She shrugs backwards into an upper-body assembly that looks like something left behind by a SWAT team. "C'mon."

Huw follows her back next door, to find a bunch of blissed-out religionists lazily osculating one-other on a row of futons. "Okay!" yells Bonnie. "It's evacuation time! Huw, get the goddamn window open and hook up the baskets." She turns back to the coterie of ministers, some of whom are yawning and looking at her in evident mild annoyance. "The bad guys are coming through the back passage and you guys are going down right now!"

"Eh, right." Huw finds a stack of baby-blue plastic baskets dangling from a monofilament line right outside the window. "C'mon … "

Between the two of them, they person-handle the dazed and tasped worshipers into baskets and drop them down the line. It all takes precious seconds, and by the time the last one is hooked up Huw is in a frenzy of agitation, desperate to be out of the building. There are indistinct thuds and stamping noises below them, and an odd whine of machinery from the hall outside. "What's going on now?" He demands. "How do *we* get out of here?"

"We wait." Bonnie gives the last basket a shove and turns to face him, panting. "The corridors and rooms in this place, the Bishop's got them rigged up to reconfigure like a maze. This whole sector should be walled off, you can't find it unless you can look through walls."

A loud echoing crash from the room next door makes Huw wince. "Do you suppose they've got teraherz radar goggles?" he asks.

"Do I — oh *shit*." Bonnie looks appalled. "Quick, grab my epaulettes and hang on, we're going down the wire!" She steps towards him, reaches around his body and grabs the monofilament with what look to Huw like black opera gloves. There's an enormous thud from the doorway behind her that rattles the walls, and then Huw is clinging on for dear life as Bonnie drops down the wire. A thin plume of evil-smelling black smoke trails from her

spidersilk gloves as they descend. "Ow." Huw can barely hear her moan and to tell the truth he's more concerned with the state of his own stomach, gellid with terror as they drop past two, three rows of windows.

The ground comes up and smacks him across the ankles and he lets go of Bonnie. They fall apart and as he falls he sees a delivery van pulling away, the tailgate jammed shut around a blue basket. "Thanks a million, bastards," Bonnie snarls, picking herself up. "Think you could have waited?"

"No," Huw pants, looking past her. "Listen, the Inquisition are round the front and they'll be after us any second —"

She grabs his wrist. "Come on, then!" She hauls off and almost drags him the length of the filthy alleyway, under rusting fire escapes and collapsing headless plastic statues of Disney cartoon characters decaptiated as graven images by the godly.

By the time they hit the end of the alley, he's up to speed and tugging her, self-preservation glands fully engaged. In the distance, sirens are wailing. "Shit. They're round the other side. So much for your wait-and-get-away-later plan."

"That was back there," she says tensely. "There's a basement garage, when the building reconfigured we could have dropped down a chute straight into the cockpit of a batmobile and headed out via the service tunnels. Woulda worked a treat if it wasn't for your teraherz radar."

"My radar?" Huw says, hating the squawk in his voice. He swallows his ire as he looks into Bonnie's fear-wide eyes. "Right." he says. "We need transport and we need to get past the Inquisition shock-troops before we can get to the out of town safe house. If they've ringed the block and they've got radar they'll see us real soon —"

"Shit," says Bonnie, her grip loosening. Huw looks round.

An olive-drab abomination whines and reverses into the alley, reversing towards them. Cleated metal tracks grind and scrape on the paving as an assault ramp drops down. It's an armoured personnel carrier, but right now it's only carrying one person, a big guy in a white suit. He's holding something that looks like a shiny bundle of rods in both hands, and it's pointing right at them. "Resistance is futile!" shouts Sam, his amplified voice echoing off the fire escapes and upended dumpsters. "Surrender!"

"Shitfuckbugger piss," says Huw, glancing back at the other end of

the alley. Which is blocked by a wall conveniently topped with razor wire — Bonnie might make it with her spidersilk gloves but there's no way in hell he could climb it without getting minced. Then he looks back at Sam, who is pointing his minigun or X-ray laser or whatever the hell it is right at him and waiting, patiently. "Surrender to who?" he calls.

"Me." Sam takes a step *back* into the APC and does something and suddenly there's a weird hissing around them. "Ambient antisound. We can talk, but you've got about twenty seconds to surrender to me or you can take your chances with *them*."

"Shit." Bonnie's shoulders slump. "Okay," she calls, raising her voice. "What do you want?"

"You." For a moment Sam sounds uncertain. "But I'll take him, too, the cad, even though he doesn't deserve it."

"Last time you were all fired-up on handing Huw over to the church," Bonnie points out.

"Change of plan. That was dad, this is me." Sam raises his gun so that it isn't pointed directly at them. "You coming or not?"

Bonnie glances over her shoulder. "Yeah," she says, stepping forward. She pauses. "You coming?" she asks Huw.

"I don't trust him!" Huw says. "He —"

"You like the Inquisition better?" Bonnie asks, and walks up the ramp.

Sam backs away and motions her to sit on a bench, then throws her something that looks like a thick bandanna. "Wrap this round your wrists and that grab rail. Tight. It'll set in about ten seconds." Then he glances back at Huw. "Ten seconds."

"Shit." Huw walks forwards, sits down opposite Bonnie. Sam throws him a restraint band, motions with the gun. "Fuck it, tie me up, why don't you." The assault ramp creaks and whines loudly as it grinds up and locks shut. Sam backs all the way into the driver's compartment, then slams a sliding door shut on them. The APC lurches, then begins to inch forwards out of the alleyway.

Over the whine of the electric motors he can hear Sam talking on the radio: "No, no sign of suspects. Did you get the van? I suspect that was how they got away."

What's going on? Huw mouths at Bonnie.

She shrugs and looks back at him. Then there's another lurch and the APC accelerates, turns a corner into open road, and Sam opens up the throttle. At which point, speech becomes redundant: it's like

being a frog in a liquidiser inside a bass drum bouncing on a trampoline, and it's all Huw can do to stay on the bench seat.

After about ten minutes the APC slows down and graunches to a standstill. "Where are we?" Bonnie calls at the shut door of the driver's compartment. She mouths something at Huw. *Let me handle this*, he decodes after a couple of tries.

The door slides open. "You don't need to know," Sam says calmly, "'cuz if you knew I'd have to edit your memories, and the only way I know to do that these days is by killing you." He isn't holding the gun, but before Huw has time to get any ideas about kicking him in the 'nads Sam reaches out and hits a switch. The grabrail Huw and Bonnie are tied to rises towards the ceiling, dragging them upright. "It's not like the old days," he says. "We really knew how to mess with our heads then."

"Why did you take us?" Huw wheezes after he finds his footing. Bonnie gives him a dirty look. Huw swallows, his mouth dry as he realises that Sam is studying her with a closed expression on his face.

"Personal autonomy," Sam says quietly, taking Huw by surprise. The big lummox doesn't look like he ought to know words like that. "Dad wanted to turn you in 'cuz if he didn't, the Inquisition'd start asking questions sooner or later. Best stay on the right side of the law. But once you got away, it stopped being his problem." He swallows. "Didn't stop being *my* problem, though." He leans towards Bonnie. "Why are you on this continent?" he asks conversationally, and produces a small, vicious knife.

"I'm —" Bonnie tenses, and Huw's heart beats faster with fear for her. She's thinking fast and that can't be good, and this crazy big backwoods guy with the knife is frighteningly bad news. "Not everyone on this continent wants to be here," she says. "I don't know about anyone else's agenda, but I think that a mind is a terrible thing to waste. That's practically my religion. Self-determination. You got people here, they're going to die for good, when they could be ascendant and immortal, if only someone would offer them the choice."

Sam makes encouraging noises.

"I go where I'm needed," she says. "Where I can lend a hand to people who want it.Your gang wants to play post-apocalypse; that's fine. I'm here to help the utopians play *their* game."

Huw has shut his eyes and is nearly faint with fury. *I'm a fucking*

passenger again, nothing but a passenger on this trip — the alien flute-thing in his stomach squirms, shifting uncomfortably in response to his adrenalin and prostaglandin surge — *fucking cargo*. For an indefinite moment Huw can't hear anything above the drum-beat of his own rage: carrying the ambassador is fucking with his hormonal balance and his emotions aren't as stable as they should be.

Sam is still talking. "— Dad's second liver," he says to Bonnie. "So he cloned himself. Snipped out this, inserted that, force-grew it in a converted milk tank. Force-grew *me*. I'm supposed to be him, only stronger, better, smarter, bigger. Kept me in the tank for two years plugged in through the cortex speed-learning off the interwebnet then hauled me out, handed me a scalpel, painted a line on his abdomen and said 'cut here'. The liver was a clone, too, so I figured I oughta do like he said less'n I wanted to end up next on the spare parts rota."

"Wow." Bonnie sounds fascinated. "So you're a designer ubermensch?"

"Guess so," Sam says slowly and a trifle bashfully. "After I got the new liver fitted Dad kept me around to help out in the lab. Never asked me what *I* wanted, just set me to work. *He's* Asperger's. Me, I'm just poorly socialized with a recursive introspective agnosia and a deficient situational relationship model. That's what the diagnostic expert systems tell me, anyway."

"You're saying you've never been socialized." Bonnie leans her head towards him. "You just hatched, like, fully-formed from a *tank* —"

"Yeah," Sam says, and waits.

"That's so sad," Bonnie replies. "Did your dad mistreat you?"

"Oh mercy, no! He just ignores … well, he's dad. He never pays much attention to me, he's too busy looking for the alien space bats and trying not to get the Bishop mad at him."

"Is that why you were taking Huw into town?" asks Bonnie.

"Huh, yeah, I guess so." Sam chuckles humourlessly. "Anything comes down in the swamp, you betcha they see it on radar. You came down in dad's patch, pretty soon they'll come by and see why he hasn't turned you in. So you can't really blame him, putting on the holy roller head and riding into town to hand over the geek."

"That's okay," Bonnie says calmly, as Sam shows some tension, "I understand."

"It's just a regular game-theoretical transaction, y'see?" Sam asks,

his voice rising in a near-whine: "he has to do it! He has to tit-for-tat with the Church or they'll roll him over. 'Sides, the geek doesn't know anything. The shipment —"

"Hush." Bonnie *winks* at the big guy. "Actually, your dad was wrong — the Ambassad — the shipment requires a living host for communion."

"Oh!" Sam's eyebrows rise. "Then it's a good thing you rescued him, I guess." He looks wistful. "If'n I trust you. I don't know much about people."

"That's all right," Bonnie says. "I'm not your enemy. I don't hate you for picking us up. You don't need to shut us up." She looks up at where her wrists are trussed to the grab rail. "Let my hands free?"

Sam listens to some kind of internal voice, then he raises the knife and slices away at Bonnie's bonds. Huw tenses as she slumps down and then drapes herself across Sam's muscular shoulder. "What do you want?" Sam asks.

Bonnie cups his chin tenderly. "We all want the same thing," she says. Sam shrinks back from her touch.

"Sha," she says. "You're very handsome, Sam." He squirms.

Huw squirms too. *Bonnie*," he says, a warning.

Sam twists to stare at him and Huw sees that there's soemthing wild breaking loose behind his eyes. "Come on," Bonnie says, "over here." She takes his hand and leads him towards the driver's cab of the APC. "Come with mamma."

Huw is revolted by the sight of Sam, docilely moving past him, nimble on his big dinner-plate feet, hand enfolding Bonnie's eyes down. He feels a sear of jealousy, and only Bonnie's sidelong glare silences him.

After the hatch thumps shut, Huw strains to overhear the murmured converation from behind it, but all he can make out is thumps and grunts, and then, weirdly, a loud sob. "Oh, Daddy, *why*?" It's Sam, and there are more sobs now, and more thumps, and Huw realizes they're not sex noises — more like *seizure* noises.

His ribs and shoulders are on fire, and he shifts from foot to foot, trying to find relief from the agony of hanging by his wrists. He steps on their pathetic pillowcase of possessions and the lamp rolls free, Ade popping up.

"My, you are a *sight*, old son," the little hologram says. "Nice hat."

"It helps me think," Huw says, around the copper mesh of the balaclava. "It wouldn't have hurt to have a couple of these on the

zep, Ade."

"Live and learn," the hologram says. "Next time." It cocks its head and listens to the sobbing. "What's all that about then?"

Huw shrugs as best as he can, then gasps at the chorous of muscle-spasms this evinces from his upper body. "I thought Bonnie might be having a shag, but now I'm not sure. I *think* she might be conducting a therapy session."

"Saving the world as per usual," Ade says. "So many virtues that girl has. Doctrinaire ideologues like her are the backbone of the movement, I tell you. Who's she converting to pervtopic disestablishmentarianist personal politics, then?"

"One of your trading partners," Huw says. "Sam. Turns out he's the Doc's son. Clone. I 'spect you knew that, though."

"Sam? Brick shithouse Sam?" There's a distant, roaring sob and another crash. "Who'd have thought he had it in him?"

"Whose side are you on, Ade? What have you been selling these bastards? I expect I'll be dead by dusk, so you can tell me."

"I *told* you, but you didn't listen. There is no conspiracy. The movement is an emergent phenomenon. It's complexity theory, not ideology. The cloud wants to instantiate an ambassador, and *events* conspire to find a suitable host and get some godvomit down his throat." Ade nods at him. "Now the cloud wants the ambassador to commune with something on the American continent, and there you are. How do I know the cloud wants this? Because you are there, on the American continent. QED. Maybe it wants to buy Manhattan for some beads. Maybe it wants to say hello to the ants. Maybe it wants to be sure that meatsuits are really as banal and horrible as it remembers."

"No ideology?" Huw says, as another sob rattles the walls. "I think Bonnie might disagree with you."

"Oh, she might," Ade says, cheerfully. "But in the end, she knows it as well as I do: our mission is to be where events take us. Buying and selling a little on the side, it's not counter-revolutionary. It's not revolutionary. It's just more complexity. More soup whence the conspiracy may emerge."

"That's all conveniently fatalist," Huw says.

"Imagine," Ade says, snottily. "A technophobe lecturing *me* about fatalism." The sobs have stopped, and now they hear the thunder of approaching footfalls. Bonnie comes through the door as Ade winks out of existence, trailing Sam behind her.

She takes both of his hands and stands on tiptoe to kiss him on the tip of his squashed nose. "You're very beautiful, Sam," she says. "And your feelings are completely normal. You tell the Bishop I told you to go see her. Him. It. They'll help you out."

Sam's eyes are red and his chin is slick with gob. He wipes his face on his checkered flannel shirt-tails. "I love you, Bonnie," he says, his voice thick with tears.

"I love you too, Sam," she says. She reaches into his pocket and takes out his knife, opens it and cuts Huw down. "We're going now, but I'll never forget you. If you ever decide to come to Europe, you know how to find me."

Huw nearly keels over as his arms flap bloodlessly down to slap at his sides, but manages to stay upright as Sam thuds over to the ramp controls and sets the gangway to lowering.

"Come on, Huw," she says, picking up their pillow-case. "We've got to get to the coast."

"*Court is in session,*" screams a familiar voice as the ramp scrapes the rubberized tarmac. Three UN golems — so big they dwarf Sam — come up the ramp with alarming swiftness and clamp hold of Bonnie, Huw and Sam before any of them have time to register anything more than a dim impression of a brightly lit alleyway and in the middle of it, Judge Rosa Guilliani: encased in a dalekoid peppermill of a personal vehicle, draped in her robes of office, and scowling like she's just discovered piss in her coffee-cup.

"You are charged with violating UN biohazard regulations, with wanton epidemiological disregard, with threatening the fragile peace of our world's orderly acquisition and adoption of technology, and with attempting to flee UN jurisdiction."

"You're out of your jurisdiction," Bonnie says.

"I'll get to you," the judge snaps. "I never execute a criminal without offering her last words, so you just sit tight until I call on you."

Sam is thrashing hard at his golem, trying to buck it off him, but he might as well be trying to lift Glory City itself for all the good it does him. For Huw, being trapped in the iron grip of a golem is oddly nostalgic, hearkening back to a simpler time when he knew he could trust his perceptions and the honest virtue of neo-Luddism.

He closes his eyes, clears his mind, and prepares to defend himself. *It's bankrupt,* he'll say. *Your UN is a sham. There's no more*

virtue in your deliberation over which technologies to adopt than there is in this benighted shithole's wholesale rejection of everything that doesn't burn petrol or heretics or both. He'll say, *The "other side" in this fight doesn't even notice that it's fighting you. Its leaders are opportunists and scoundrels, its proponents are patsies at best and sadists at worst.*

Huw sucks in air to deliver this speech that will rescue him from the gibbet, ignoring the many aches and owies that light up his body like accupuncture needles, and there is a tremendous crash as another APC crunches down in the alleyway behind the Judge, its ramp falling to reveal ranked men in white robes, numerous as ants, clutching tasp-wands, scimitars, pulse-guns, ballistic guns, and cruciform spears that hum with sinister energy.

"It's the Inquisition," Bonnie says. "I *told you* you were out of your jurisdiction." She looks like she's ready to say more, but Sam breaks free of his golem's grip with a roar and snatches her up, flings her over his shoulder and disappears into the guts of his APC, which clanks away amid the whining ricochets of small arms fire from the soldiers of the Inquisition.

Judge Rosa's spinning turret give the Inquisitors pause, especially after it blasts a dozen of them out of their boots. Finally, one brave soul darts forward and jams a speartip down its barrel, falling to the ground when the Judge nails him with enough electricity to freeze-dry him on the spot, so that he clatters when he hits.

They give up on moving her, surrounding her instead with bristling guns. "I have diplomatic immunity, you God-bothering imbeciles," she screeches, the amplified howls knifing through their skulls and dropping a few of the remaining Inquisitors to their knees.

They hustle Huw into the APC, kicking him to the grippy deck-plates and pinning him there with a gun-barrel dug hard into one kidney. They leave a detail to watch the Judge and clank away with him to the auto-da-fe.

"This is gonna hurt you a *lot* more than it hurts us," one of the Inquisitors breathes right in Huw's ear as the ramp drops in the main plaza of Glory City, where a crowd of thousands awaits his appearance.

They drag him up by his much-abused arms, letting his feet scrape the ground. He loses a shoe on the way to the stage, and the other on the way up the steps. His overalls tear on ground, so that by the time he's hauled erect before the crowd, the skin covering

one whole side of his chest is abraded away, a weepy, striated road-pizza left behind.

A white robe is draped around him and snapped shut in behind and around his arms. The crowd roars with anticipation, and their faces swim before him, each in a rictus of savage anticipation. Huw wishes he still believed in his God-self, but they've left him his copper balaclava, so he's out of the god-box.

"Sinner?" a voice says, hissingly, in his ear. It echoes off the walls of the plaza, off the balconies crowded with hooting spectators who fall silent when these amplified syllables are sounded. "Sinner, can you hear me?"

The speaker is right there in his ear, as close as a lover, breath moist. "I can hear you," Huw says.

"Will you confess your sins and be cleansed of them before we end your life on God's earth?"

"Sure," Huw says. "Why the fuck not?"

There's a disapproving murmur from the crowd and the left side of Huw's head lights up like someone's stuck a live wire to it. A chunk of his ear falls wetly to the stage before him and the crowd roars as the hot blood courses down his face.

"You will not profane this courtroom," the hisser hisses.

Huw struggles to remember his brave speech for the Judge, but it won't come. "I —" he stammers. *They're going to kill me*, he realises, a sick certainty rising with his gorge. "I —"

"You stand accused!" the speaker shrieks in his ear. "Unclean! You have consorted with vile demons and the sky-born minions of Satan! You did wilfully escape from the custody of your arresting officer and were found in wanton congress with the degenerate scum who swirl in the cesspit of their own tumescent desires in the swamp of iniquity for which we are *damned*!" His accusor's voice rises. "Lo, these score years and eight we have dwelt since the Rapture, the ascent of those who are bathed in the blood of the lamb, and what is it, you faithful among the fallen ask, what is it that holds us back to this land of sorrows? And I answer you: it is the likes of this miserable sinner! Behold the man, lost in the sorrow and degradation of his evil!"

Huw manages to stay silent while the inquisitor gets himself worked up into a holy-roller frenzy of foaming denunciation. It would appear that Huw has single-handedly doomed every living human on the North American continent to a fiery and perpetual

damnation by his pursuit of sins both trivial and esoteric, from sodomy to simony by way of barratry and antimony. Concentration is hard. He's weak at the knees, and the entire side of his head feels as if it's been dipped in molten lead. He listens to the condemnation with mounting disbelief, but not even the accusations of ministering iced-tea enemas to the ailing baby ground-squirrels in the petting zoo manage to drag a protest from him in the face of likely punishment. He can see the score to this scene and his words would merely serve as punctuation for random acts of degradation and violence against his person. Finally the inquisitor winds down, his voice ratcheting into a gloating hiss. "How do you plead, sinner?"

"Does it make any difference?" How asks the sudden silence, hating the tremor in his voice. "You're going to kill me anyway."

The small of his back explodes and he falls over, unable to draw breath with which to scream. Dimly he registers a couple of shadowy figures standing over him — one of them having just clubbed him in the kidneys.

"How do you plead, sinner?"

Huw isn't about to plead anything because he can barely breathe, but the inquisitor seems to view this as deliberate recalcitrance: he raises a hand and another guard steps forward and clubs Huw between the legs.

"How does he plead? Anyone?" The inquisitor roars at the crowd, hidden amplifiers boosting his voice and scattering it across the plaza like a shotgun blast.

"Guilty! GUILTY! *GUILTY!*" roars the crowd.

"The prosecution, having made its case before God and man, rests," says the inquisitor, leaning heavily on a baseball bat.

"Hmm." Huw is distantly conscious of another, more thoughtful voice. "And what do you say, minister for the defense?"

"Nothing to say, your Grace." The defense attorney's voice is thin and reedy and quavers a little. "My client is obviously guilty as sin."

"Then I guess we are in agreement. Okay, y'all, let justice be done." Guards pick Huw up off the ground and bear him to the front of the stage. "In the name of the authority vested in me by the law of the Lord, as Bishop of this principality, I hereby find you guilty of whatever the hell you're guilty of. We don't get to give justice, that's his upstairs's job. So the sentence of this court, handed down in mercy rather than in anger, is that we're going to give you a one way ticket to ask the holy father for clemency and forgiveness in

person. To heaven's gate!"

The crowd roars its approval and people begin to stream out of the square like ants, boiling and shifting to repel an invasion of their territory. Huw groans, gasps for air, and coughs up blood. "It won't hurt," the judge promises, almost kindly. "Not much, anyway."

There's another brief journey by APC, this time barely out of the square and back round a couple of side roads. The guards let Huw lie on a bench seat, which is a mercy, because his legs aren't working too well. *Just get it over with,* he wishes dismally. *Is anyone going to tell Sandra?* he wonders. *She got me into this —*

The APC parks up and the ramp rumbles down. They're in another of the huge access tunnels that run through the wall of the dome, like the one Doc and Sam dragged him in through almost a day ago. It's been a very long day — the longest. Vast blast-proof doors close behind the APC, slamming shut with a thunderous boom. The guards frog-march Huw down the ramp and out, up the tunnel to the next set of doors. There's another APC behind the one he arrived in, and a handful of dignitaries step out of it to witness the proceedings.

The guard on his left lets go of him. "When the doors open, run forward," he says. "If you dance and stamp your feet a bit they'll figure out where you are faster. They know they're going to be fed, though, so they'll be waiting for you. If you make them come inside they'll take their time."

"You're going to feed me to the ants," he realises.

"God's little helpers," says the guard to his right.

"What if I don't cooperate?" Huw asks woozily.

The guard on his left hefts his cattle prod thoughtfully. "Then we'd have to work you over some more and do it again." He hefts the prod in Huw's direction. "Not that it's any trouble, mind. All the same to us."

Huw backs away from the guards until he thumps into the outer door of the airlock. "Oh. Oh shit." The guards are wearing hermetically sealed tuppersuits. So are the official witnesses. A bell clangs from the front APC. Then the door he's leaning against begins to grind down into the ground. Huw glances round and sees the guards and witnesses scurrying backward to the safety of their armoured vehicles, despite the security of their anti-proof suits. "Fucking cowards!" he tries to yell, but it comes out as a cracked squawk. *Damn, I'm going to die and I don't even get a good exit line.* He

turns back to face the opening door and takes a step forward towards the blasted wilderness that used to be North America.

It's like the surface of the moon — or worse. A lightning strike somewhere up the coast has set one of the petrochemical forests on fire and the resulting smogbank has smeared the baby-blue bowl of the sky with the sooty muck of a by-gone age. The sun itself is a bloated red torch aflame in a sea of shit-coloured clouds that roil and bubble above a landscape the colour of charred ash. Gas trees march into the distance from the flanks of the Glory City dome, but the ground beneath them is muddy brown and shimmers slightly — at first Huw thinks it's covered in a slick of escaping light fraction crude, but then he looks closer and sees that the shimmer is that of motion, the incessant febrile ratcheting digestive action of a myriad of superorganisms. The ants are lords of all that they survey — and that includes him.

Huw steps forward onto the desolate ground, leaving the tunnel mouth. He glances round once. "Bastards," he mouths at the smugly merciful Bishop and his torturers, safe in their air-conditioned tanks. There's a faint rattling humming noise in the air, and he takes a deep breath, wondering how long it'll take the ants to notice him. What chance does he have of reaching another airlock? Probably not much — they wouldn't be using this as an established means of execution if survival was easy, or even possible. But Huw has no intention of giving the assholes in the dome the satisfaction of actually seeing the ants get him. He takes another deep breath and lurches forward — one knee is very much the worse for wear and he's light-headed and nauseous from the beating he's taken — trying to get away from the front of the airlock.

"Huw?"

At first he thinks he's hallucinating. It's Bonnie's voice, distant and tinny, and that grinding rasping noise is back. There's also a faint sizzling sound, like hot fat on a grill. He shakes his head and lurches on.

The sizzling noise is back. The ground ahead is dark, like an oil spill. "Huw? Where are you? Hang on!" He stumbles to a halt. The oil slick is spreading like a shadow, and when he looks round he sees it extends between him and the dome. *That's odd.* He looks down. *Ants.* They're everywhere. He can't out-run them. So he collapses to his knees and looks at them. They're what's making the sizzling noise. It's the noise of a trillion millimetre-wide cutting

machine mouths chowing down on the universe. If they could speak their message would be, *you will be assimilated*. He reaches out one shaky hand and a winged ant alights on his fingertip. He brings it close to his face, ignoring the scattering of fiery bites on his legs and knees, trying to meet the eyes of his executioner.

The ant stares at him with CCD scanners. It spreads its wings and Huw watches, entranced, trying to read the decals embossed on each flight surface. *Chitin is waxy, isn't it?* He realises. *It would dissolve in the gasoline mangroves. So these aren't —*

"Huw! Hang on! We'll rescue you!"

It *is* Bonnie's voice, he realises, looking round in disquiet. Massively amplified, it booms out across the wasteland from the top of a vehicle that looks like an old-fashioned swamp boat with a bulbous plastic body mounted on it. The boat is surfing *over* the ants, he thinks, until he realises that there's not much of a solid surface over there.

"Can you hear me?" Bonnie yells.

Huw waves.

"Great! I'm going to pop the hatch and lay down an insecticide screen! When you see it go, I want you to run this way! Three! Two! One!" *Bang.*

One end pops off the side of the swamp boat and a cloud of foam drifts out. Bonnie follows it, something like a flame thrower strapped to her back. She's pumping away in all directions, striding towards him on his little raised island, and Huw realises that nothing, *nothing* has ever looked as beautiful to him as this pansexual posthuman, lithe and brilliant in her skin-tight neoprene suit, laying about her with grace and elegance and GABA-inhibitors as she comes to rescue him from this frankly insane situation —

Huw lurches into motion, a drunken and lopsided wobble impelled by a now-fiery burn at the side of his face. The ants have tasted blood and they're hungry. He howls as he runs, and Bonnie steps aside and spritzes him on the fly. "Go on!" She calls. "I'll cover you!" He needs no urging, but lurches on towards the swamp boat rescue. Within the back of the translucent bubble he can dimly see a figure — Sam, maybe? — working the controls, keeping the big blower on the back of the boat in ceaseless motion, sucking ants through the mincing blades —

He's on the ground, and he can't remember how he got there. "Shit, this is no good," says Bonnie. "What have they done to — oh

fuck." She picks him up and begins to drag him, her breath coming in gasps. The ants see their prey escaping and close in, an ominous sizzling hymn of destruction on the wing. "Go *on*!" she urges, and Huw manages to get one leg working. They hop along together and Bonnie gives him an enormous shove, boosting him up the side of the boat and in through the airlock. The open 'lock bay is crawling with fiery red ants, the disassembler toolkits on their heads whining in an irridescent blur. Huw bats at them, and Bonnie stands up just outside the airlock to spritz down the swamp boat, and then something like a monstrous humming tornado falls on her with an audible thud. She screams once, and twitches, and Huw cowers at the back of the airlock.

"*FUCK!*" The door he's lying against crashes backwards under him, tumbling him into the swamp boat as Sam leaps over his body and dives forward. "Bonnie!"

With the last of his strength Huw grabs one of Sam's ankles, tumbling him into the lock. "Stop," he gasps.

"Bonnie!" Sam howls. But he freezes instead of throwing himself out into the gray storm.

"Close the door or we're both dead," Huw gasps.

"Bonnie!" One meaty hand reaches out — then closes on the airlock panel. "Oh god. Oh shit." There's a Bonnie-shaped outline just visible on its feet through the whirlwind but it's glowing white, the colour of live bone, and something tells Huw that he's looking at her skeleton, crucified on a storm of insectoid malice in the act of rescuing him from the swarm — *they'll be waiting for you* — and Sam swings the door shut with a boom on its gaskets just as the pile of white bones at the heart of the tornado explodes outwards and collapses across the wasteland in front of the airlock.

They're not out of danger. Sam howls and grabs at his face, falling backwards against the opposite wall of the airlock. "Spray!" he yells, like a dying desert explorer calling for water.

Huw fumbles around the cramped cell, squishing bugs wherever he finds them until he sees the blue spray bottles strapped to one wall. He hauls himself upright and takes aim at Sam. "Where do you want it?" he asks.

Sam half-turns towards Huw and holds his hands out from his face. Huw retches and holds the trigger down, blasting Sam in the — in what's left of the front of his head. The ant tornado that came down on Bonnie must have shed waves of flying biting

deconstructors, for Sam's head hosts a boiling pit of destruction, cheeks bitten through and eye sockets seething. The noises Sam makes are piteous but coherent enough that Huw is sickly afraid that the man's going to survive. And after what happened with Bonnie he's not sure what that means.

"Glag-ad," Sam gurgles, and Huw yanks down the emergency first aid kit and pulls out a gel pack that says something about burns and bites and massive tissue injuries on its side. He lays it across the top of Sam's face, making sure to leave a hole around his mouth, then hunts out a syrette full of something morphinesque and whacks it into Sam's upper arm. After a tense minute Sam's whistling breaths slow and the shuddering spasms relax into something like sleep.

How is nearly out of it by this time, drunk on a cocktail of terror, pity, pain and exhaustion. The world seems to be spinning as he hauls himself through the rear door and into the cockpit at the back of the craft. *Smuggler's swamp boat*, he realises. Doc must not have wanted to show this anywhere near Glory City. As he studies the unfamiliar controls he comes to the unpleasant conclusion that he's not going anywhere on his own. *Don't know how to operate it, and if I did, I wouldn't know where to go,* he realises. He glances out the windshield at the gathering darkness, punctuated by the evil fire-red bellies of ants that are trying their luck on the diamond-reinforced sapphire laminate. (Some of them are even leaving gouges in it.) *Just a temporary reprieve …*

There's a crackle from a grille on the dash. "Ready to accept UN jurisdiction, you miscreant?" croaks a familiar tenor. Huw stares at the speaker as floodlights come on behind him in the depths of the swamp, spearing the cab of the smuggler's boat with a blue-white glare. "Or would you rather I crack that toy open like an egg and leave you to the ants?"

Christ, Huw thinks. *It's not as though I know how to drive this goddamned thing, anyway.* He presses a button next to the grille. "Can you hear me?" he says. He repeats this with four more likely-looking buttons until Judge Judy"s cackle answers him back.

"You going to come along peacefully?"

"Sure looks like it," he says. "Do I get to stand trial somewhere civilized?"

The judge chuckles fatalistically. "Once we shoot our way off this fucking continent and nuke it in our wake, I fully intend to drag your spotty ass back to Libya for a proper trial. Does that suit you?"

"Down to the ground," Huw says. "Now what?"

"Herro," Ade says, popping up out of his lantern after the Judge has Huw shrink-wrapped and tossed in a narrow hold, her daleksuit and her golems filling up all the available on Sam's boat. "Ew," he says, when he catches sight of Sam's ruin of a face. "That can't be good."

"He'll get fixed up once he gets to civilization," Huw says. "Judge is taking us to Libya." He sighs and tries to get comfortable in his enforced, plastic-wrapped vermicularitude. "The ants got Bonnie," he adds, conversationally, his voice hollow and echoing in the cramped hold.

"You don't say?" Ade says. "Well, that's too bad. Scratch one useful idiot."

"You know, it's going to be a pleasure to rat you out to the UN," Huw says. "A pleasure to get the ambassador cut free and fed to a disassembler. Your movement stinks."

The tiny Adrian plants its hands on its hips and cocks its head at Huw. "Useful idiots I have patience for," he says. "Useless idiots, well, that's something else altogether."

The boat judders to a halt. There's a roar of jets overhead and a series of crashes all around them. *We're being bombed,* Huw thinks. The boat bounces like a pea on a plate. "Sam, are you conscious yet?" he says, aloud. Sam doesn't move. *Just as well,* he thinks, and prepares to die.

"Oh, please spare me the drama," Adrian says. "I radioed your position to the Bishop so that he could capture you, not kill you. The Ambassador needs a host."

He hears the golems slam past his hold and run out to do battle, then more jouncing crashes.

"I have *diplomatic immunity*," the Judge screeches as something drags her past his cell. A moment later, the hatch opens, and Huw and Sam are lifted, dumped into a gigantic airtight hamster-ball, sealed, and rolled away back toward Glory City.

"Children," the Bishop says. He is thin and weak-chinned and watery-eyed, and his voice is familiar. It takes Huw a moment to place it, and then he remembers the voice, moist in his ear: *Sinner, can you hear me?*

"You are in: So. Much. Trouble." Judge Judy is no longer hissing

like a teakettle, but her rage is still clearly barely under control. "What do the words 'Diplomatic Immunity' mean to you?"

"Not an awful lot, We're afraid," the Bishop says, and whitters a little laugh. "We don't much go in for formalities here in the new world, you know."

They've amputated the dalek suit's gun and damped its public-address system, so that Judge Judy is reduced to a neutered head in a peppermill with a black robe of office draped round it, but she is still capable of giving looks that could curdle milk. Huw numbly watches her glare at the Bishop, and the Bishop's watery answering stare.

"What *shall* We do with you?" the Bishop says. "Officially, you're dead, which is convenient, since it wouldn't do to have the great unwashed discover that God's will was apparently to let you go.

"The entity who alerted Us to your presence was adamant that the sinner here should be spared. You're host to some godvomit that many entities are interested in, and consequently, you may live. So chin up, right?"

"I'm thrilled," Huw says. "But I 'spect that means that Sam here's *not* going to live? Nor the judge?" Sam is zap-strapped at the ankles and wists and shoulders and knees and thighs, but it's mostly a formality. He's barely breathing, and the compress on his face blooms with a thousand blood-colored roses.

"Well, of course not," the Bishop says. "Heretics. Enemies of the state. They're to be shoved out the lock as soon as We're sure that they've got nothing of interest to impart to Us. A day, two tops. Got that, your honor? As long as you say useful things, you live."

The Judge sputters angrily in her peppermill.

"Now, let's get you off to the operating theatre," the Bishop says.

Huw can barely muster the will to raise an eyebrow at this. "Operating theatre?"

"Yes. We've found that quadruple amputees are much more pliable and less apt to take it on the lam than the able-bodied. You'll get used to it, trust us."

The servants of the Inquisition, ranged around them, titter at this.

"Take them away," the Bishop says, waving a hand.

Huw is having a dream. He's a disembodied head whose vocal-chords thrum in three-part harmony with a whistle lodged in his stump of a throat. The song is weird and familiar, something he

once sang to a beautiful girl, a girl who gave her life for him. The song is all around him, sonorous and dense, a fast de/modulation of information from the Cloud, high above, his truncated sensorium being transmitted to the curious heavens. The song is the song he sang to the beautiful girl, and she's singing *back*.

His eyes snap open. He's on the floor of his cell, parched dry and aching, bleeding and naked. The whistle warbles deep in his throat and the floor vibrates in sympathy, with the tromping of a trillion tiny feet and the scissoring of a trillion sharpened mouth-parts.

The ants come up through the floor and Huw squirms away from them as best as he can — but he's still shrink-wrapped and the best he can do is hump himself inchworm style into a corner, pressed up against the wall of the dome that forms the outer wall of his cell. The song pours out of his throat, unabated by his terror. Some part of him is surprised that he's capable of caring about anything anymore, but he does not want to be eaten by the ants, does not want to be reduced to a Huw-shaped lump of brick-red crawling insects.

The whistle's really going to town now. The Ambassador is having words with the hypercolony, and Huw can just barely make out the sense of the song he's singing: *Ready for upload*.

The ants have covered him, covered the walls and the floor and the ceiling, they've eaten through his coating of shrinkwrap, but the expected stings don't come. Instead, Huw is filled with the sense of vast clumps of information passing through his skin, through the delicate mucous membranes of his eyes and nostrils, through his ears and the roots of his hair, all a-crawl with ants whose every step conveys something.

Something: the totality of the hypercolony — its weird, sprawling consciousness, an emergent phenomenon of its complexity, oozing through his pores and through the Ambassador and up to the cloud. It's not just the ants, either — it's everything they've ever eaten: everything they've ever *disassembled*.

Somewhere in that stream is every building, every car, every tree and animal and — and every *person* the ants have eaten. Have disassembled.

Bonnie is passing through him, headed for the Cloud. Well, she always did want to upload.

Huw doesn't know how long the Ambassador holds palaver with

the hypercolony, only knows that when the song is done, he is so hoarse he can barely breathe. (During a duet, do the musicians pay any attention to the emotional needs of their instruments?) Huw leans against the wall, throat raw as the Ambassador chatters to the ant colony — biological carriers for the engines of singularity, its own ancestral bootstrap code — and he can just barely grasp what's going on. There are complex emotions here, regret and loss and irony and schadenfreude and things for which human languages hold no words, and he feels very stupid and very small as he eavesdrops on the discourse between the two hive minds. Which is, when the chips are down, a very *small* discourse, for the Ambassador doesn't have enough bandwidth to transmit everything the ants have ever stored: it's just a synchronization node, the key that allows the hypercolony to talk to the cloud in orbit high above it.

And Bonnie is *still* dead, for all that something that remembers being her is waking up upstairs, and he's still lying here in a cell waiting to be chopped up by barbarians, and there's something really weirdly wrong with the way he feels in his body as if the ants have been making impromptu modifications, and as the Ambassador says goodbye to the ants a sense of despair fills him —

The door opens.

"Hello, my child." It's the other Bishop, the pansexual pervert in the polygenital suit. It winks at him: "expecting someone else?"

Huw tries to reply. His throat hurts too much for speech just yet so he squirms up against the wall, trying to get away, for all the time an extra millimetre will buy him.

"Oh, stop worrying," the Bishop says indulgently. "I — ah, ah! — I just dropped by to say everything's sorted out. Mission accomplished, I gather. The, ah, puritans are holed up upstairs watching a fake snuff video starring yourself, being disassembled for spare organs — operating theatres make for great cinema and provide a good reason for not inviting them to the auto da fe in person. Isn't CGI great? Which means you're mostly off the hook now, and we can sort out repatriating you."

"Huh?" Huw blinks, unsure what's going on. *Is this a set-up?* he wonders — but there's no reason *why* the lunatics would run him through something like this, is there? It's so weird it's got to be true. "Wh-whaargh, what do you mean?" He coughs horribly. His throat is full of something unpleasant and thick, and his chest feels sore

and bloated.

"We're sending you home," the Bishop says patiently. It holds up a slim hand and snaps its fingers; a pair of hermaphrodites in motley suits with bells on the tips of their pointy shoes steer in a wheelchair and go to work on Huw's bonds with electric shears and a gentle touch. "You have our thanks for a job well done. I'd beatify you, except it's considered bad form while the recipient is still alive, but you can rest assured that your lover is well on her way to being canonized as a full saint in the First Church of the Teledildonic. Giving up her life so that you might survive to bring the hypercolony into the full Grace of the Cloud certainly would qualify her for beatification, even if her other actions weren't sufficient, which they are as it happens." Slim hands lift Huw into the wheelchair and wheel him through the door.

"I feel weird," Huw says, voice odd in his ears. *His* ears? He manages to look down, and whimpers slightly.

"Yes, that's often one of the symptoms of beatification," the Bishop says placidly: "the transgendered occupy a special place of honour in our communion, and to have it imposed on you by the hypercolony is a special sign of grace." And Huw sees that it's true, but he doesn't feel as upset about it as he knows he ought to. The ants have given him a whole goddamn new body while the ambassador was singing a duet with them, and he — she — is about five years younger, five centimetres shorter, and if her pubes are anything to go by her hair's going to come in two shades lighter than it was back when she was a man.

It's one realisation too many, so Huw zones out as the Bishop's minions wheel her up the corridor and into an elevator while the Bishop prattles on. The explanation that the Bishop is both the leader of the Church Temporal — the fallen Baptists — and the Church Transcendental — the polyamorous perverts — passes him by. There's some arcane theological justification for it all, references to Zoroastrian dualism, but in her depression and disorientation the main thing that's bugging Huw is the fact that she survived — and Bonnie didn't.

Upstairs in whatever dwelling they're in, there's a penthouse suite furnished in sybaritic luxury. Carpets of silky natural growing hair, wall-hanging screens showing views from the landscapes of imaginary planets, the obligatory devotional orgy beds and sex crucifixes of the Church of Teledildonics. The Bishop leads the

procession in through the door and a familiar voice squawks: "you'll regret this!"

"Perhaps." The Bishop is calm, and Huw sees why fairly rapidly.

Judge Guilliani spins her chair round and glares at him, then her eyes fasten on the wheelchair. "What happened here?" she demands.

"The *alien artefact* you so urgently seek," the Bishop says with heavy irony. "It has accomplished its task, and we are blessed by the fallout. Its humble human vessel who you see before you —" a hand caresses Huw's shoulder — "is permanently affected by the performance, and *we* are deeply relieved."

"Its. Task." Guilliani is aghast. "Are you insane? You let it *out*?"

"Certainly." The Bishop smirks. And we are all the ah, ah, *better* for it." He pauses for a moment, sneezes convulsively, and shudders orgasmically. "Oh! Oh! That was good. Oh my. Yes, ah, the cloud has re-established its communion with the North American continent, and I feel sure that the hypercolony is deeply relieved to have offloaded almost two decade's worth of uploads — everything that has happened since the Rapture of the Nerds, in fact."

"Ah." Guillani glares at the Bishop, then gives it up as a bad job — the Bishop doesn't intimidate easily. "Who's this?" she demands, staring at Huw.

"This? Don't you recognize her?" The Bishop simpers. "She's your creation, after all. And you're going to take very good care of her, aren't you?"

"Gack," says Huw, blanching. She tries to lever herself out of the wheelchair but she's still weak as a baby.

"If you think I'm —" a puzzled expression crawls over the Judge's face. "Why?" she demands. She peers closer at Huw and hisses to herself: "you, you little rat-bastard! Court is in session —"

"— Because the Ambassador she carries is the main pacemaker for all uploads from the North American continent, and if you don't look after her the Cloud will be *very* pissed-off with you. And so will the hypercolony. Oh, and if you don't promise to look after her, you aren't going home. Is that good enough for you?"

"Ahem," says Guilliani. She squints at Huw, eyebrows beetling evilly. "Main pacemaker for a whole continent? Is that true?"

Huw nods, unable to trust her throat.

"Hmm." Guilliani clears her throat. "Then, goddamnit, I hereby find you not guilty of everything in general and nothing in particular. All charges are dismissed." She glares at the Bishop. "I'll

even get her enrolled in the witness resettlement program. Will that do for now?"

Huw shudders, but the Bishop nods agreeably. "Yes, that will be sufficient," he says condescendingly. "Just remember, you wouldn't want the hypercolony to come calling, er, crawling, would you?"

The judge nods, meek submission winning out over bubbling rage.

"Very well. There appears to be a jet with diplomatic clearance on final approach into Charleston right now. Shall we go and put you it?"

Halfway across the Atlantic, Huw falls into a troubled sleep, cuddled restlessly in her first-class berth. Sitting up-front in Ambassador class, the Judge mutters darkly to herself, occasionaly glancing nervously over her shoulder in the direction of Huw and her passenger. Far above them, the Cloud whirls in its orbit, tasting the meat with its mutifarious sensory apparati, thinking its ineffable thoughts, muttering in RF and gravity and eigenstate. Now it's got someone to talk to downstairs, signals synchronized by the beat of Huw's passenger, it grows positively voluble: catching up with the neighbourhood gossip, chuckling and chattering about the antics of those loveable but dim dreaming apes who remain below.

Huw's dreaming she's back at Sandra Lal's house, in the aftermath of that memorable party that started this whole thing off. Only she's definitely *she* — wearing her new body, aware of it but comfortable in it at the same time. She's in the kitchen, chewing over epistemology with Bonnie. A sense of sadness spills over him but Bonnie laughs at something, waving — Bonnie is male, this time — at the window. Then he holds out his hand to Huw. Huw walks into his embrace and they hold each other for a long time. Bonnie doesn't say anything but his question is clear in Huw's head as she leans her chin on his shoulder. "Not yet," Huw says sleepily. "I'm not ready for that. Not 'til I've kicked Ade's butt halfway into orbit and cleared it with the judge. They're making you a saint, did you know that?"

Bonnie nods, and makes a weird warbling sing-song noise in the back of her throat. It soothes Huw, and she can feel an answering song rising from the Ambassador. "No, don't worry about me," Huw murmurs. "I'll be alright. We'll get together some time; I just have some loose ends to tie up first."

And the funny thing is that even inside her dream, she believes it.

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